



TRICIA OWENS

TROUBLE
With
GARGOYLES

AN URBAN FANTASY
MOONLIGHT DRAGON BOOK 3

Trouble
with
Gargoyles

Moonlight Dragon
Book 3

Tricia Owens

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Chapter 1

"This is no fair!" I yelled to the crowd. "I'm competing against a Mayan. Her mom's breast milk was probably spicy!"

That earned me some jeers and laughter. And comments from the peanut gallery:

"Watch out for the little ones! Their legs are short but they're hollow!"

"She does have a mean look about her, like she eats ghost peppers for breakfast!"

"Fifty bucks says neither of them makes it through the first bucket!"

That last comment prodded me to find the guy who'd said it and point at him threateningly. He threw up his hands and pretended to be scared.

I shook my head. They all thought this was fun and games, but this was serious. Deadly serious.

Well, okay, probably no one was going to die, but odds were at least one of us was going to be whimpering by the end. I faced off against my best friend Melanie, glaring at her from my side of the plastic covered table. Between us sat a humongous bucket of Adios Level chicken wings. It practically glowed, like a bucket of chicken shipped straight from Chernobyl.

Around us, most of the diners in the Wild & Wooly Wings restaurant were cheering, rooting either for Melanie or for the underdog, which was definitely me. We were competing for the title of Wild & Wooliest Wingwoman. For me, this was a major challenge. I hadn't grown up eating the kinds of foods that my Mexican-born friend had. I might spit fire as a dragon, but I sure as hell didn't ingest it for pleasure. This was going to be rough.

I adjusted my plastic bib nervously and rolled my head on my neck, trying to stay loose. I tried some positive visualization of chicken

wings flying effortlessly down my throat then had to stop because just, ew.

"Anne, you are so going to regret this later!" Melanie warned me cheerfully. She had clipped her blue bangs off her forehead to make sure hot sauce didn't accidentally get on them while she plowed through the wings. "I'm gonna clean the floor with you, haha!"

I pretended I hadn't heard her, playing it cool. Whoever ate the most wings won the challenge, but in my mind this was a marathon, not a sprint. The true measure of whether I'd won or lost this competition would be how I felt hours from now. But probably only swallowing liquid Teflon was going to save me from agony.

The restaurant manager came up to our table and coaxed everyone to hoot and holler as he brought a whistle to his lips. He paused dramatically, one arm raised, looking Melanie and I each in the eye. Then he chopped his hand down and blasted the whistle to begin the competition. The restaurant erupted in cheers.

The first wing I grabbed was a slippery little bugger. It was covered in so much sauce it squirted through my fingers and over my shoulder, hitting some kid in the chest and making a big mess of his Adventure Time T-shirt. I shouted an apology but there was no time to pause for collateral damage. Though my fingers had already begun to burn just from that brief contact, I bravely dug another wing out of the bucket and shoved it at my mouth as though I were starving.

As a half-Chinese sorceress who commanded a dragon familiar, I was accustomed to temperatures that made most people flinch. My dragon's primary power was fire. I tended to burn things to cinders. Other sorcerers came to your house for a visit; maybe they turned your crappy box wine into Chateau Latour or made your houseplants sing. Me, I burned your couch. Pair that with being a Las Vegas native who poo-pooed triple digit summers and you'd think I had this in the bag. But, oh, man, when the sauce hit my lips and then my tongue... And then when it slid down my throat and fell into my belly like a lit charcoal briquette...Well, let's just say it took all my willpower not to shriek.

I wasn't a wimp. No way, no how. I'd been through a lot in my twenty-four years. My parents were murdered when I was four and my uncle disappeared without a trace two years ago. I deserved a medal for that alone, but that was just the beginning. Being descended from dragons meant that my sorcery was tied to my ancient Chinese blood. It didn't

matter that I was only a half-breed with a Caucasian dad; my ancestral blood was strong enough that every time I used my sorcery I was tempted to give in to the lure of the dragon and *become* a dragon. That was super bad. Think Maleficent—in the Disney cartoon movie, not the one with Angelina Jolie.

Once you became a dragon you were usually lost to it and faced being hunted and killed. Sure, yes, twice I'd managed to return to my human self, but neither time had been easy. It had hurt, kind of like I was hurting now. I told myself I was used to pain. Nevertheless, hissing and wincing, with sweat beading on my upper lip and forehead, I tried to recall why I'd thought this outing was a good idea.

"Keep *eating*!" screamed a skinny guy in the crowd who was obviously a shareholder of Wild and Wooly Wings. I mentally flipped him off.

The hot wings were ruining my mood, which hadn't been so good to begin with. On the surface, my life had seemed mostly okay ever since Melanie and my boyfriend Vale helped me dispatch a creepy guy named Felix Dearborn. Dearborn had been an ex-professor turned golem-maker who had possessed a mummified finger that could raise the dead. Obviously that was bad and obviously I felt compelled to do something about him. It didn't hurt that he was responsible for killing my parents. He had a big ol' target on his back any way you looked at him.

Like the good guys you saw in movies, my friends and I didn't kill Dearborn. But considering the last time I'd seen him he'd been hog-tied in the desert and about to be overrun by his own undead army, I wasn't worried about a rematch.

Immediately following the confrontation with Dearborn I'd convinced myself that I was a badass sorceress who could control my magick. Because, hey, why wouldn't I think that? I'd resisted burning down Las Vegas while in my dragon form and I'd put a stop to the bad guy. I was Anne Moody, Queen of All She Surveys.

Right?

Wrong. The reality wasn't that rosy. Things, or maybe it was more accurate to call them *episodes*, had begun occurring in my shop which made me question just how badass I really was.

Ugh. Just thinking about it made me want to two-fist a couple of pitchers of beer at the bar.

"You're going down, Anne!" Melanie cried out, her lips smeared with red sauce. She had a crazed look in her eye. Or maybe that was just the monkey in her, freaking out about all the chicken meat she was ingesting.

"You're supposed to be a vegetarian!" I yelled back because, you know, she was a monkey shifter.

Melanie laughed at the accusation and sucked another wing dry before dropping the cleaned bones onto the table in front of her. "You'd better hurry if you want to beat me!"

I was pretty sure I was only beating myself. I paused, grimacing and rubbing my burning stomach. In a twisted way I savored the pain. It reminded me that I was human and not a dragon.

But what are you going to do? Eat hot wings every time you use your sorcery? There's a reason it's called "inner strength", Anne. It's supposed to come from inside you.

I hated the voice, but the voice was right. I had all this downtime while Las Vegas seemed safe and quiet to get my act together, and yet I wasn't any stronger or braver than before. I was the same old me. Actually, I was a little bit worse, since now I'd failed *twice* to stop myself from giving in to the dragon. Didn't matter that I'd recovered both times; it was a slippery slope I was dancing on.

"Don't stop!" the people around us shouted at me. "You can do it!"

"Keep eating!"

"You're all sadists," I groaned as I reached for another death wing.

"Show us how tough you are, girl!"

I grimaced and gave a half-hearted wave to the woman who'd yelled that. Testing my toughness was no longer on my agenda these days. It was willpower and courage I was in short supply of.

Across the table from me, Melanie was cruising to an easy victory. Despite being a flat five feet tall, she was eating me under the table, her chubby cheeks pumping up and down with machine-like precision. I had a vision of her shifting into her monkey form and instantaneously exploding from the pressure in her stomach.

Laughing despite the pain I was in, I reached for one more wing that I could pretend to eat until the timer went off.

As I was lifting the wing to my mouth something strange rippled along my awareness, like someone had run a finger across the nape of my

neck. I sat up straight and looked behind me. Only a grandmother and the kid that I'd thrown my first wing at were within reach. Doubtful that either of them had messed with me.

I nibbled absently on the wing as I tried to figure out what it was that I'd felt. Was I having an allergic reaction to something in the sauce? Had I reached my Scoville limit and my body was telling me I needed to call the Fire Department? Would the guys who showed up be the same firefighters who had posed in the calendar I had back home?

Magick was a funny thing. Las Vegas was loaded with chance magick that was generated by all the gambling activity. So much magick pooled here that the Oddsmakers had come in to oversee its usage, afraid that it would be abused (and they weren't wrong). All that power lured magickal beings to the city either because they wanted their magickal practices to be enhanced—a little extra sting in a curse, for example—or because they felt an inexplicable pull, sort of like people visiting the land of their ancestors and experiencing an instant connection.

Rarely did magickal beings stick out in a crowd. All of us knew never to flaunt our magick. Among those cheering me and Melanie on could very well be a witch who'd cursed me during her last visit to the women's restroom.

I looked over the crowd carefully, on the eye out for someone who didn't appear to be all that enthused to be watching a chicken wing-eating contest. Chances were better than keno odds that I had enemies, likely friends of Dearborn. The golem-maker himself wasn't much of a threat both because I was certain he was buried somewhere in Eldorado Canyon and because his condo, which had been packed with all sorts of dark magickal doodads, had been completely hollowed out by a fire that miraculously hadn't affected any other unit in the tower.

However, maybe all his creations hadn't died with him and were now after revenge.

"One minute!"

The restaurant manager's announcement pulled my attention back to the most urgent matter at hand. I looked at the table in front of me, which held the bones of less than a dozen wings, and then over at Melanie's side of the table. She was beating me by more than double, but I was gratified to see that she'd at least broken a sweat from all the hot sauce.

I tossed my half-eaten wing on the table in defeat even though there were still a few more seconds left. That strange shiver that I'd felt just a moment ago hadn't left me; it had morphed into something pretty unpleasant. Was it the pepper? If it were only a physical sensation I would have said yes and flipped the table. Or at least used it as an excuse for why I'd lost.

But this was a feeling that bordered on anxiety and paranoia, as though someone had just whispered in my ear that guys with guns might be waiting for me outside the restaurant. In fact it was a feeling I'd become all too familiar with lately, and I couldn't believe I was feeling it outside of the pawn shop. I'd come here to get away from it!

Disturbed, I tried to play it off as me just being super stressed. However, I couldn't shake it, not even when time was up and the restaurant manager yanked Melanie's sauce-covered hand above her head and declared her the winner while our audience cheered and whistled.

While the celebration continued, I pushed back from the table. People patted me on the shoulder and told me good job. I smiled absently at them but my eyes were for the door. Someone was about to come through and they would be coming for me. I knew this in a way I couldn't explain, just a quirk of being a magickal being.

Calling up Lucky, my dragon familiar, would be a big no-no in a crowded place like this. Ordinary people weren't permitted to know about the magick underbelly of this city. None of my kind wanted to be thrown into the back of a van and transported to a secret government lab for testing and torture. Defending myself with magick against whatever was coming for me wasn't an option. Well, it was an option only if I didn't care if my magick was stripped from me for good.

"Still need to learn kung fu," I muttered to myself as I wove through the crowd, heading for the front door and the hostess stand.

A young girl stood behind the podium. She was probably in her late teens, obnoxiously pretty in that sunny, Hollywood way that I could never be. Her attention wasn't captivated by the cheering mass behind me but by what she could see through the restaurant's glass doors, which were directly in front of her. My anxiety and paranoia took on a new tint of dread. What was she looking at?

The waiter's service station was to my left. I darted to it and grabbed a knife out of the utensils tray. It wasn't a great weapon and I'd be

lucky if it was sharp enough to slice a tomato, but with enough force and aimed precisely it could buy me some time to run or create a distraction. With the metal resting cool along my forearm, I approached the front waiting area.

The hostess still hadn't broken her obsessive fascination with whatever was beyond the front doors. It occurred to me that she might be mesmerized, spelled to put up no defense against whatever was heading for the door. Or worse, she was petrified with terror by what she could see.

"Anne!"

I heard Melanie calling for me from deeper in the restaurant, shades of concern in her voice. It prompted me to hurry the last few feet to the hostess stand. If there was danger I wanted to be the one to face it, not my little monkey shifter friend.

"Hey," I said to the hostess, though my eyes were on the front doors.

Someone was approaching.

"Hey!" I said in a louder voice. I slapped the knife on the top of the podium.

She snapped out of her moony gaze to blink wildly, first at the knife, then at me. "Oh! I-I'm sorry. I don't know what—m-may I help you?" She took a nervous step back from the knife.

"I'm looking for toothpicks." Now that she was paying attention to me, she couldn't seem to tear her gaze away from the lower half of my face.

"Oh, uh, yes, right here, ma'am."

Ma'am. I was twenty-four years old! Grinding my teeth only a little, I accepted the three wrapped toothpicks she handed me. As I did so, the front door banged opened.

Vale stormed in. He did that a lot, storming. I liked it a lot, too. Brooding, mysterious, a sucker for having his hair pulled—Vale was a boyfriend I probably didn't deserve. But everyone got lucky once in a while in Vegas. It was apparently my turn.

He wasn't classically handsome; that award went to his best bud Christian. But Vale was compelling. I'd never looked into a guy's eyes before and believed that he was thinking about things that mattered. Maybe Vale liked sports—I'd never asked him—and maybe his secret hobby was comic book collecting, but I doubted it. He wasn't trivial and he

wasn't shallow. Vale was as ancient and multi-layered as a Redwood. When I was with him he made me feel that everything I said held significance, and that every action I took affected the world.

I liked that. Before meeting him I had thought relationships were all about holding hands and staying in for pizza and being intimate. And it *was* those things at times. But Vale made me believe that us coming together could mean more than a new relationship status on Facebook. It could mean making a difference to someone. Maybe to everyone.

The hostess beside me didn't bother hiding how she checked him out from his motorcycle boots and scuffed jeans to the dark hoodie that was one of his favorites. She saw only the surface, the sparkle that meant nothing. If she was able to sit down with him and talk to him she'd either want to marry him or she'd run away, claiming that he was too "heavy". The only reason I didn't burn down the hostess stand was because Vale's dark eyes didn't acknowledge her even for a moment. He had eyes only for me.

"Moody," he said.

I shivered at that deep voice. One of these days I was going to ask him if he practiced it. That was kind of a sexy thought, but I put it away for later because I'd picked up something else in his voice that wasn't associated with canoodling.

I stepped toward him. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth to reply and abruptly frowned. "What's that all over your face?"

I reached up. Did my best not to cringe. "Oh, you know. Just bobbing for hot wings. It's a new sport. You should try it."

I reached over the edge of the podium and grabbed some tissues from the box there. I hastily mopped the sauce off my mouth, cheeks, and chin so I no longer looked like a sloppy cannibal. I also belatedly noticed I was still wearing my plastic bib. With a curse, I yanked it off and balled it up. Vale might be deep and sophisticated, but I was still a work in progress.

"What is it?" I asked, frustrated. Worried. My lips and tongue were on fire. It hurt to speak.

Vale caught my arm and pulled me to the door. "It's Christian."

My heart dropped. I looked back for Melanie. Christian and she had an on-again, off-again thing. I think they were currently on, but it

didn't matter either way. Vale's demeanor told me this would affect Melanie, too. She was making her way toward us but kept getting waylaid by congratulatory diners. Everyone wanted a piece of the hot wing queen.

"Don't tell me he's dead," I whispered to Vale. "Just don't."

I liked Christian, which was a surprise because I normally distrusted super good-looking guys who were aware of how gorgeous they were. Christian fit that bill, but it turned out he was an okay guy. He'd probably saved Vale's life.

"Something's happened to his mother."

"Diana," I breathed.

Another candidate for someone I shouldn't like and, well, I actually didn't like her, come to think of it. She'd insulted my heritage and even though she'd been under a compulsion cast by Vagasso, she'd still tried to kill me and my friend Orlaton in order to help Vagasso overthrow Las Vegas.

But disliking someone didn't mean I wanted them to be hurt.

"She's dead," Vale confirmed, a bit loudly. He looked deep into my eyes for something. "Did you feel it?"

I cocked my head, surprised. "Did I feel it? How would I—" I paused, recalling what I'd just been experiencing. "Did it happen just a few minutes ago?"

He nodded. "She took her own life."

I clapped a hand over my mouth, genuinely shocked. Diana had been a witch and a pretty tough and bitchy one. She'd survived her encounter with Vagasso and that had to count for something. She hadn't struck me as depressed or as a quitter. It didn't make sense.

"Why would she do that? Wasn't she in California?" I had a thought. "Was it because she missed Christian? She couldn't have been too thrilled with his decision to stay in Las Vegas when Vagasso is still here."

"You're closer to the truth than you know," Vale murmured and then he was stepping past me and drawing Melanie into a hug.

She gaped at me from over his shoulder, mouthing "What's going on?" at me.

Vale straightened and leaned away from her so he could see her face. "I need you to come with us to see Christian. He could use a friend right now. His mother just passed away."

There was more to it, though. Even the death of the world's most powerful witch, which Diana wasn't, wouldn't have made the magickal impression on me that her death had. Something else was going on and I was dying to know what.

Chapter 2

Melanie parked her Prius at the sidewalk between my shop, Moonlight Pawn, and my friend Celestina's fortune teller shop. The lights in my shop were dark and the gate on the yard was closed. Everything looked quiet and peaceful, but I was suspicious. After all, a fairy looks sweet and pretty up until it flies up your nose.

I was glad to turn away from my darkened shop and follow Vale and Melanie to Celestina's. From the outside, it looked like a regular home. The neighborhood was zoned for both commercial and residential use. The traditional palmistry hand painted in the front window, surrounded by Christmas lights, was Celestina's single, effective advertising for her services.

I always got a real kick out of stepping inside the place. For as ordinary as it looked from the outside, the house was a complete shock on the inside. It was the closest you'd get to entering a Haitian mambo's Vodou shack, even if some liberties had been taken for the sake of theatricality and sales. Candles burned in tall glassware that was decorated with images that represented the spiritual Lwa, or gods. New Orleans-style Voodoo dolls, stick dolls, and altars overflowing with colorful offerings to the spirits combined with rattan-covered walls and a soundtrack playing chanting and drumming. It was all super cool. Celestina had done an awesome job creating a mood where you believed she could read your fortune. Which, incidentally, she absolutely could.

She wasn't doing a reading now, though. She, Christian, and a big black wolf were currently standing in the center of the room beneath the dozens of Voodoo dolls that hung from the ceiling by fishing line. The Voodoo dolls were purely for sales. Celestina's family had practiced Vodou, which didn't utilize the classic dolls that most people in the West, thanks to New Orleans and Hollywood, associated with the religion. The dolls were still fun. My friends and I got together once or twice a year to make them. The more primitive the better, because that read 'authentic' to

the kinds of people who bought them. The result was a bunch of fairly raggedy-looking dolls. Mine always sold the best, and I refused to read anything negative into that honor.

When Christian turned to face us, I expected to see certain emotions on his face. To my confusion, I saw none of them. He grinned handsomely at us. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

I had to glance uncertainly at Vale, who looked uncomfortable as he strode forward to his best friend's side. "They need to know," I heard him mutter.

"Yeah," I said loudly for all concerned. "We need to know. What's going on?"

"Is your mom really gone?" Melanie asked in a tremulous voice, her eyes already shiny.

The black wolf, who was actually a wolf shifter named Lev as well as Celestina's boyfriend, trotted over and butted his head against Melanie's hip to comfort her. She absently patted its thick fur as we all waited for Christian's response.

His smile had dimmed as he'd evidently recognized that we were on a different page of the play than he was. "You're sure it's safe here?" he asked Celestina.

I thought it was a strange question. Safe for what?

Celestina, decked out in so many fabrics of varying lengths that I wasn't completely convinced she hadn't simply tied a dozen dark scarves over a bikini and called it a day, nodded emphatically. "It's why she came here in the first place, remember? No one associates you and her with me."

All of this secret talk was getting on my nerves. "Christian, the question is a simple one: how is Diana?"

He tried to charm us with a smile, which was probably his default response to all of life's challenges. He could have been a red-haired male model. Normally that would put me off. Beautiful people made me suspicious. To be fair, though, Christian had proved himself to be a reliable ally. I guess it wasn't his fault that he was gorgeous.

"My mother is gone, yes. Technically," he added, which made me narrow my eyes. "But she's not officially dead. She's gone into, er, a state of hibernation, I guess you could call it."

I rubbed at my forehead. While I was glad to hear that Diana wasn't dead, this still sounded complicated. "What does hibernation even mean?"

She's a witch, not a bear."

He shuffled his feet, now looking as uncomfortable as Vale did. "Maybe I should let her explain it."

I looked warily between him and Celestina. "Who?"

"Me," said a faint, breathy voice.

The voice had come from directly overhead. I raised my eyes reluctantly. To the hanging Voodoo dolls.

Where one of them was waving at me.

"What the hell is *that*?"

Celestina replied with a smirk, "*That* is Diana. Her consciousness, anyway." She motioned at the other unmoving dolls, making the bangles on her wrists clank musically. "They're not possessed or alive. It's only that one doll."

"Okay, so a better question might be *why*?" I wanted to back away. I didn't like dolls that moved. I'd had one or two in my shop that periodically repositioned themselves or blinked or wept blood. Every last one of them creeped me the hell out.

"Something was hunting me," said the breathy voice that came from the Voodoo doll. The effigy was about six inches tall and designed to look vaguely like a woman. It had bright, fuschia-colored yarn hair and a rough burlap dress tightened at the waist with a bit of string to give it the illusion of hips and a waist. Its eyes were a pair of mismatched buttons attached with thread and the mouth was a slash crudely drawn on with a paint pen that had been nearly out of paint. I knew this because I'd made the doll last year. I'd tried to give the doll a smirk so it would have attitude. But thanks to the old pen the doll just looked like it was grimacing or had recently suffered a stroke.

"Some kind of creature attacked me," Diana-doll said, "and it demanded to know what was happening in Las Vegas."

"That's not vague at all," I said. "What kind of creature? What did it mean by 'happening'? Was it asking about the party scene? Table games odds? Rates on buffets? I need more, Diana."

"Moody," Vale murmured, slashing me a look that told me to back off. He was probably right and I was being unnecessarily snarky, but I didn't like being led here under false pretenses. That was how Little Red Riding Hood ate it. Or make that, was eaten.

"I don't know what it was," Diana-doll replied. "It cornered me in my apartment tonight after I'd come home from dinner. The lights were off. It kept to the shadows." The doll's slash mouth didn't move, but its poorly sewn little arms waved about for emphasis. It should have been funny seeing this small doll gesturing as it hung from the ceiling but it wasn't. It really, really wasn't. "It asked about you. And Vale and my son. All of you." Diana-doll hesitated. "It wanted to know what we'd done to Vagasso."

"Vagasso!" Melanie hissed.

She'd crept up to my side while I wasn't paying attention and grabbed my arm as she said this, nearly making me jump out of my shoes. She and I smelled like chicken wings, which likely explained why Lev the wolf periodically poked my bare legs with his cold nose as he hungrily sniffed us.

"So it knew about the demon summoning." I found that extremely interesting since it narrowed our list of suspects. "It had to have been one of the people who participated in the ceremony. Someone you didn't know was a shifter."

"None of them were," the doll insisted.

"Well, outside of us and Orlaton, no one else knows what happened that night. And Orlaton isn't a shifter and he's not one to blab."

"It wasn't anyone who'd been there," Diana-doll confirmed as adamantly as her breathy voice would allow. "This was a creature. And it...spoke to me telepathically."

Oh. I threw a glance at Vale, but his expression told me zilch. That was odd.

"It was probably a shifter," Diana-doll went on, "but it could just as well have been a monster of some sort, I suppose."

Supposing was the best that any of us could do. All sorts of critters ran around Vegas and no one really knew what they all were. Hell, I don't think some of the creatures even knew what they were. Some of them were the results of dark magick accidents: a ritual performed incorrectly, or a curse taking on a particularly gruesome or unexpected turn. For as many fascinating and truly 'magickal' beings that lived here, there was probably an equal amount of things you didn't want to encounter without an elephant gun and a gallon jug of holy water.

But the part about the creature speaking to Diana with its mind... that part bothered me more than anything else could.

The doll waved its munchkin arms. "It wanted to know what we'd done but I refused to say anything. Then it threatened to torture me! Well, there was no chance of me holding out. This thing would have torn me to shreds. So I did something I'd studied long ago: I left my body behind and fled here."

Something tightened on Christian's face. Melanie saw it, too, and dashed over to curl around his side. If the two of them had been 'off', they were now currently on because a monkey didn't let go until she wanted to. Melanie was in protective and nurturing mode, just like she'd been after Christian was staked out in his backyard. He'd be lucky if he got through the night without her spoon feeding him Jell-O.

"You shouldn't have resisted it," he said in a tight voice. Finally he exhibited the emotion that I'd expected to see when I'd heard he'd lost his mother. "It's not your job to protect me. You should have told that creature everything it wanted to know. I can protect myself. So can everyone else."

"I'm not interested in advertising our efforts against Vagasso," Diana-doll said with a touch of parental authority in her voice. Six inches tall or no, Diana was still a strong-willed mother. "We don't know who that creature is in league with. And by the way, Christian, you are *not* invincible. Case in point, I went to Anne's shop first before coming here. The curses there have become intolerable. How does that happen? Any one of you could be infected. You could find yourself growing hair in embarrassing places, or have something affect your pee-pee."

"Mo-other," Christian groaned, slapping a hand over his face.

"Pee-pee," I whispered to myself, horrified on his behalf.

"How *did* you know to come here, by the way?" Celestina asked the doll. She shared a brief look with me. "You and I have never met that I'm aware of."

"We have not met, young lady. However, back when Vagasso ordered me to track down the gargoyle statue I'd noticed this... establishment. I was aware that you were friends with Anne, so I hoped your friendship meant that you were trustworthy. At any rate, remaining in the pawn shop was not an option. The curses there are out of control. One tried to attack me the moment I arrived there."

That would explain the weird feeling I'd felt at the restaurant: something at Moonlight wasn't playing well with others.

"It was a good choice," I said quickly, hoping to deflect everyone from Diana-doll's comment about the increased curse activity in my shop. "Celestina is absolutely trustworthy, and Christian isn't associated with this place so no one would think to look for you here."

"But she's not here," Christian gritted out. Melanie patted his flat stomach soothingly but he didn't notice. "Her body is back in California and she can't return to it, isn't that right, Mother?"

The Voodoo doll performed a close approximation of a shrug. "A concern for later. The important thing is that I didn't give the creature the opportunity to use me against you, and now you've been warned that something is after you. I did my motherly duty."

We all looked at each other. Without knowing who was interested in us and why, we had no real defense to put up against them. But I would guess that if this shifter or monster, whatever it was, intended to torture Diana as she'd claimed, then it was bad news.

"After what you've told me, I'm thinking this creature that attacked you in California, isn't associated with Vagasso or his pals," I said. "All the information it asked for it can get directly from Vagasso. This thing might be a completely new threat."

"Why?" Celestina asked. "We're not currently involved in anything that would draw the attention of other magickal beings."

"Friends of Dearborn?" I suggested. "Wanting to know if their buddy's BFF is planning revenge?"

Vale shook his head, dislodging a lock of brown hair to curl above his eyebrow. "His creations died with him, and from what I know, he worked alone except for his interactions with Vagasso."

That was all good news, but it still left us hanging as to why a creature had been willing to torture Diana to learn more about us.

"Unfortunately the creature gave me no hints as to its motive," Diana-doll said. The doll's arms suddenly jerked straight up, like she was cheering a field goal. "No! I'm mistaken. There is one thing...it didn't ask about Anne first, which you would expect, considering that she's descended from dragons and we all know about *those*."

I gritted my teeth, telling myself Diana simply didn't realize how insulting and condescending she sounded when she talked about my

heritage.

"It asked what I knew about Vale," Diana-doll went on.

I wasn't particularly happy about that revelation. A glance at my gargoyle boyfriend showed he didn't appear too thrilled with it either.

"Could mean nothing," I ventured. "A coincidence." But I wasn't fooling or convincing anyone. We had to consider the possibility that Vale mattered more than the rest of us to this creature, and figure out why that was.

I smirked at him. "I won't bother asking you if you have any enemies." My tone was dry, because he and I both knew that Vale would answer in the negative. According to him, he was Mr. Popular. Anyone who didn't like him—such as a fringe group that disliked cold-blooded shifters—had been kindly told to leave him alone.

As I expected, he ignored the comment to address the Voodoo doll. "Explain to us about the condition of your physical body. You're using a form of astral projection but you can't maintain this forever. You'll need to return eventually. We need to make sure it's safe for you to do so. Are you able to check on your body?"

"Unfortunately, it's all or nothing with the spell I've used. Either I commit to my body or I commit to this doll. This isn't true astral projection. It's a spell I developed that allows instant extraction from the physical form, with the caveat that I am unable to move around freely and observe."

Vale nodded as if this was a subject he knew well. At least someone understood what was happening.

"I was fortunate there was something in this house that I was able to move into," Diana-doll continued with a droll laugh. "I might have been forced to move into a sack of rice. I had less than two minutes to choose. After that, my untethered consciousness would have been forever lost to the ether."

That little tidbit made Christian blanch until his freckles jumped out like stars in a constellation.

Diana didn't seem to notice or care. "I can give you the address of my apartment, Vale. I don't know what you'll find inside it, so forewarned." Her breathy voice somehow managed to sharpen. "Christian, I forbid you from going anywhere near the place. I mean it."

It was disconcerting to hear this small doll's voice warning Christian away just in case a dismembered or otherwise unusable body waited to be discovered. Diana might be tough and a bit overbearing, but there was no questioning her backbone or her love for her son. I admired that even if I wouldn't have wanted to be stuck in a car with the woman for longer than twenty minutes.

"I'll take care of it," Vale stated.

"And if you can't return to your body?" Christian asked quietly, his blue eyes steady on the Voodoo doll. "What happens to you then, Mother?"

We collectively held our breaths for Diana's answer.

The doll did its weird shrugging motion again. "Then you'll learn to love a Voodoo doll, Christian. Why must you make things so difficult?"

"Well, then." I was beginning to like this woman.

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"Not so fast."

Vale had cornered me in the kitchen, where I was washing my hands and face at the sink in the hopes that Lev's wolf would stop following me around. Our friends were in the living room, trying to brainstorm who the creature could be and what its motives might be.

I gave Vale an innocent look. "What's up?"

"What's going on over at Moonlight?" He leaned a hip against the counter beside me and peered closely at my dripping face. "Something's happening with the curses. Diana mentioned them twice."

I reached for one of the hand towels hanging in front of the oven and patted my face dry. "Did she?"

The towel and the kitchen smelled of beef jerky. Celestina and Lev sold the jerky as a side income, though I suspected the jerky was mostly for the wolf's enjoyment and selling some of it was Lev's way of keeping Celestina from complaining too much. After the hot wings and now this I was ready to go vegetarian for a week. I tried to push past Vale and return to the living room but he blocked me.

"I'm not letting this go."

"I see. So you're demanding the truth from me." I poked him in the chest with a finger. "But what do *you* know about telling the truth, hmm?"



He stepped back, hands up. At least he was smart enough not to play dumb with me. "I apologize. I didn't want to lie to you about Christian's mother. But I couldn't tell you the truth in public. Anyone could have overheard us in that restaurant or even in Melanie's car. It's important that she's perceived as dead so no one goes looking for her."

"You couldn't have hinted that she was okay? You had to go and scare me and Melanie?"

"Moody, I'm sorry. I thought it was more important to get you here so you could learn the truth from the source."

As far as things to be upset over, this was at the insignificant end of the spectrum. I had no trouble letting it go. And anyway, I'd achieved what I'd wanted.

"Fine, you're forgiven," I said magnanimously. I tried to push past him and was again denied.

"I still want to know what's happening at Moonlight." Vale was as tenacious as a gargoyle with a stone bone. "When Diana mentioned the curses you grew very still."

Sometimes having a perceptive boyfriend could be a real hassle when you were trying to be sneaky.

I rolled my eyes. "Look, it's nothing. She was exaggerating. You know how Moonlight is. Other people see it as a madhouse. I see it as—what it is."

He shook his head. "She said it's worse."

"You're taking her word over mine?"

"Are you giving me your word?"

Damn him. "Fine, some things have been happening," I said carelessly. "Just some new curses, that's all. I'll handle them like I've handled the rest."

But I could tell that his curiosity had been piqued. "I thought the current curses were all formed when your uncle was running the shop."

"Yeah, well, apparently it's a general curse that took a little snooze and now it's awake again and gleefully making my life a Crazytown." The bitterness and paranoia slipped into my voice before I could stop them. Vale's raised eyebrows said he'd picked up on it.

"Moody, you're taking me over there so I can see for myself."

"I thought you were going to California to check on Diana's body."

"I'll do that after." He took hold of my arm and steered me out the back door and into the yard.

"What are we doing?" For a hopeful second I thought he was interested in fooling around.

"We're avoiding distractions and excuses," he muttered, killing that fantasy real quick.

I huffed as he unlatched the back gate at the side of Celestina's house. "I wouldn't use either."

"Of course not."

"Hey, where are you guys going?"

Vale muttered something beneath his breath before turning and shushing Melanie into silence. He jerked his head to the side to indicate she should come with us. Wide-eyed, she followed us as we came through the front yard and crossed the sidewalk until we reached the iron gate surrounding Moonlight's yard. Here, Vale had to pause because of the magickal wards protecting the property.

They wouldn't let him in, which meant I could have ditched him there. But deep down I was glad that he was pushing this. Moonlight had driven me to near suicide by chicken wings. It was time for some outside help, or at least another opinion. Feeling like you were going insane was kind of a lonely feeling.

I entered the yard while he and Melanie watched from the safety of the sidewalk.

"What are we doing?" Melanie whispered.

"Why are you here?" Vale countered.

"I could tell Christian wanted some time alone with his mother." Melanie's normally bright countenance dulled. "I think he's afraid she won't be able to return to her body and she'll eventually fade away."

"I'll find out for certain," Vale promised, making it sound like he'd resurrect Diana's dead body if he had to. It was nice to have such a determined, kickass boyfriend.

I rearranged the white quartz and the black obsidian in the yard so the rocks formed a new pattern. Every day required a new pattern that arose from my subconscious. It was a neat twist on the usual defense and one that Orlaton had taught me. For as much as a snotty brat as he was, he had been surprisingly helpful of late.

The wards dropped silently but noticeably, as though someone had opened the door of a sealed room. One minute pressure was there, the next it had vanished. I approached the door of Moonlight with a trepidation I tried not to let my friends see or sense.

After unlocking it, I hesitated with my hand on the knob. "Just so you know, anything could be inside. And I mean *anything*. Elvis riding an elephant, your last girlfriend turned into a man—it's all possible."

Vale dismissed my warning with an impatient nod. "Just open the door, Moody."

He asked for it...

I pushed the door in.

As soon as I did, Melanie gasped, "What is *that*?"

We all stepped inside for a closer look, which was the worst thing we could have done.

## Chapter 3

The shop was dark. Close your eyes dark. That shouldn't have been possible because of the two large front windows facing the streetlights outside, not to mention the light that oozed in from the back studio.

But something was up, not only because of the unnatural darkness but because it revealed flashes of blue within it, as though someone in the shadows was trying without much luck to spark up a lighter.

It wasn't just one lighter, either. Maybe dozens of sparks periodically flashed throughout the shop in the vicinity of the ceiling. Oddly enough, it was a somewhat charming effect. It made me think of mini stars struggling to be born, or perhaps neon colored glow bugs trying to kick start their illumination. Or, just a bunch of really stoned concert-goers who'd bought shitty lighters. I could feel Vale and Melanie close behind me as I moved toward the tiny blinking lights to try to determine what they were.

We made it easy for the front door to slam close under its own power. Made it easy for the room to go completely black. We all spun toward the door, but in my gut I sensed we'd already made our fatal mistake.

I was right.

The sparks above our heads suddenly exploded into brightness, prompting us to cry out and fling our hands up to shield our eyes. Our eyes rapidly grew accustomed, but that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

I loved *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Who doesn't? Han Solo is hot in it. But I could unequivocally state that I wasn't a fan of the trash compactor scene when it was occurring within my own shop. Melanie screamed when she realized what was happening, which I admit was an expected response but it wasn't exactly *helpful*.

"Moody, what the hell is going on?" Vale shouted above the rumble of four walls and a ceiling somehow managing to move toward us. The

walls I got, but how did the ceiling come down when the walls weren't sinking?

Magick, that was how. And it was also to blame for the sparking, snapping bolts of blue electricity running above our heads that threatened to fry us all.

I was about to tell my friends to make a break for the door when I noticed that it had disappeared. As in, there was no longer a doorknob. The windows, too, appeared to have glazed over and hardened, as if the glass had turned into sheets of petrified wood. When I looked to the beaded curtain that separated the shop floor from my studio in back, I was only partly surprised to see that the opening had been plugged with that same wood-like surface.

We'd walked right into a trap.

Melanie was a monkey shifter and Vale was a gargoyle. Both were undeniably talented and useful in their own ways, but in this situation it was up to me to stop whatever was happening. Damn. I should have resisted Vale harder because I'd *known* something would happen while we were here.

Merchandise began to fall off the shelves. The shelves themselves moved forward across the cheap tile floor with rough, jerky movements that filled the air with screeching noises that stung my ears. Electricity slithered across the ceiling like a nest of blue snakes. A lightning bolt of it snapped against one of the katanas on the far wall with a loud *crack!* that made us all instinctively duck. The static in the air was so potent I could feel my hair lifting off my scalp.

Using my sorcery wasn't my first choice. Not by far. In the back of my mind I'd hoped that I would never have to call upon my dragon again. I understood my weakness and I preferred to avoid situations where it might be revealed; my ego didn't care about proving that I was strong enough to overcome it. Our current situation, unfortunately, had less to do with egos than with survival.

"Get into the middle!" I yelled.

As the three of us huddled together in the center of the shop, I reluctantly reached into that rumbly place behind my breastbone. That should have been my wonderful place, the source of my strength both as a sorceress and as a person. But these days it felt more like a sore spot that hurt to be touched. Wincing, I called up Lucky. I carefully fed him enough

energy that he transformed from golden mist to corporeal, thirty-foot Chinese dragon in the space of two seconds.

I shuddered hard at the sensation of scales rippling across my skin. My heart, already racing, pounded fiercely as the familiar and yet alien call of my ancient blood began to sing to me. Just Say No to Dragons was my mantra, and I mentally chanted it to try to drown out the cajoling sensation. *No dragon. No dragon.*

Lucky rammed his big head at the door, which shook the house impressively. The door held, even under repeated hits. He tried ramming one of the windows. Again, no dice. He needed to be bigger. Stronger. More like a living dragon.

Even when faced with that indisputable proof, I couldn't bring myself to give him more energy. The fear of losing myself to the dragon filled my veins with ice. As I fought off a mounting feeling of panic, I directed Lucky to coil around the room and form a buffer between us and the crushing walls.

When the moving shelves hit his body a few seconds later, he flexed and held them back. I cringed at the screeching sound of resistance. But the important thing was that Lucky didn't budge. His anaconda-like body bulged with muscles as he held the walls in place.

The ceiling was still coming down, though...That could be a problem.

"Which would you prefer?" I shouted to Vale. "Being electrocuted or being crushed?"

The look he shot me was priceless...right before the lights went out.

I screamed along with my friends. The ropes of electricity no longer provided any illumination, but I could still hear them hissing and sparking above our heads. My entire body tensed with dread, primed for a painful strike of energy. When something went *boom!* as though a bolt of lightning had just struck the roof, I screamed again.

Dying by electrocution sounded like one of the worst ways to go. But how could I avoid that fate while still keeping the walls from crushing us? *What more could I be doing?*

The answer was painful for being so obvious. This curse was keyed to me. It only ever occurred when *I* was in the shop. My friends were merely unlucky collateral damage from something that was meant to hurt

me. Therefore it was on me to protect them, to stop this. I needed to give my dragon full power.

Except I was terrified.

I typically thought of myself as reasonably brave, or at least stubborn, which could pass for brave. But in that moment I understood the truth: I wasn't brave; I was lucky. Lucky that both times I'd succumbed to the lure of my ancestry there had been someone present to pull me out of the dragon madness: Liliana the first time and Vale the second. On my own, I'd failed to save myself twice.

Vale was here and I didn't doubt that he'd be ready to help me again, but what if this time he couldn't? What if each time I became the dragon I slid further beyond reach of saving?

"Anne!" Melanie called out. She didn't say anything more. She wouldn't pressure me, but I understood her plea: *You can save us...so save us!*

She thought this was so easy, that the only reason I hesitated was because I feared drawing the attention of the Oddsmakers. But they didn't scare me the way they should; not when I feared myself even more. Melanie didn't know that, though. She saw me as fearless and badass. That carried responsibility. I shot to my feet, telling myself I was doing what Melanie needed me to do and to be.

But once fully straightened, I did nothing except close my eyes.

The buzzing above my head was maddening. The electricity must be less than six inches from the top of my skull. If I became the dragon, might I survive this? It was a moot question. I was more terrified of giving in to the dragon than of being electrocuted.

*Crack!*

The lights blinked on again.

I snapped my eyes open and practically gave myself whiplash as I threw my head back to look up at the ceiling. Deadly electricity no longer twined above our heads. The shop walls were back in place where they should be, with the junk that had fallen off their shelves still scattered across the floor. Lucky, coiled protectively around my friends and me, was now braced against nothing but air.

"What the hell was that?" Vale demanded angrily, surging to his feet. He grabbed me by the upper arms. "Were you going to sacrifice yourself for us, Moody?"

It would have been so easy to say yes, to pretend that I had been on the verge of being the heroine my friends apparently thought I could be. I looked into Vale's wide eyes and opened my mouth to tell him the truth.

I surged forward and kissed him. His hands on my arms loosened and I took advantage of his shock to grab him by the sides of the face and deepen the kiss. He yielded to me in surprise, giving me the chance to be aggressive and bold. Strong.

*That's right, folks. Big, bad Anne Moody is back in the house. With the power to kiss the hell out of a guy, but forget about saving your life when the chips are down.*

Yeah, such a heroine.

I broke the kiss as suddenly as I'd begun it, leaving Vale breathless, his pupils blown. Melanie was staring at us, her earlier fear replaced by girlish amusement.

Vale touched his lips, still looking slightly stunned. Then, conscious of Melanie watching, he lowered his hand. "Tell me what the hell just happened," he said roughly.

I shrugged, the picture of cool nonchalance. "I kissed you and you nearly swooned. Seems pretty clear to me."

His glare was worth it. Totally.

But I'd cheated, and no one knew that better than I.

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"Why didn't you tell us, Anne!" Melanie looked ready to stamp her feet. "All this time! I can't believe it!"

I nodded like the bad girl I was. "I honestly thought that that one time with the wasps was Dearborn trying to agitate me," I told them. "But then when my bed tried to nibble on me and all the money in the register kept catching fire, well...I guess I didn't want to worry you guys. None of it was dangerous, just annoying. Until now."

"You're not going back in there until we determine what's causing it," Vale said sternly.

"I'm not arguing with you there."

We'd gathered on the sidewalk outside of my shop because everyone was nervous about being crushed and fried a second time. A part of me felt gratified that they now shared the anxiety that I'd been living

with for weeks. But that was selfish and I quickly banished it. I could have asked for help but I hadn't. That was on me.

"I should have guessed something was wrong when you wouldn't invite me over," Vale murmured, just between the two of us.

I rolled my eyes, though inside I was relieved that he was able to joke about this. "Because you're so irresistible that it doesn't make sense otherwise, is that it?"

He smirked. "You said it, not me."

"The truth is that it's just really annoying. I can't relax in there." *And it's leading me to harbor some seriously unsexy doubts about myself.* Who cared about how I looked in a bikini when I had to worry about whether I'd turn into a fire-breathing monster?

"Well, no kidding, Anne!" Melanie butted in. "I can't believe you spent even one night in there."

I hooked my thumbs in my bra straps and drawled, "We Moodys are hardy folk."

"Except your uncle didn't have to deal with that." Vale pointed at Moonlight. "Everything that's happening now is new. And yet you've done nothing that could have revived a dormant curse."

"I like that you believe I'm well-behaved," I quipped.

"I know that you don't like to use your sorcery unless you're threatened," he said quietly.

My throat grew tight and I couldn't look at him. It was important to me that Vale saw me as strong and competent. It wasn't that he'd shown hints that he would leave me if I wasn't those things, but those were traits that I demanded of myself.

My own death wasn't my greatest fear. Not really. If I could be this wonderful, powerful woman then I believed that if Vale or Melanie or any of my other friends moved away or worse, were killed, then I would be able to handle their loss without pain. In the end, that was what drove us all, wasn't it? Fear of suffering, fear of being afraid. In my case, I feared being abandoned, of being the last person left standing. I thought that maybe if I were this super dragon warrior of the desert, then that fear wouldn't touch me.

But the fear is definitely touching me, because I'm no dragon warrior.

I wasn't sure if Vale was aware of how I felt, but I had a hunch that he did. He watched me all the time. It was immensely flattering, if a little unnerving when I was trying to keep a secret. Still, I'd take an observant boyfriend over one who struggled to notice when I got my hair cut.

"If your magick didn't trigger this curse," he went on, "then this is being caused by something else. I wouldn't be surprised if there's physical evidence here to explain what's going on."

That caught my attention. Why hadn't I considered the possibility that the source of all the craziness in Moonlight was something I could identify and stop?

"Let's call my cousin Rodrigo!" Melanie said excitedly. "He's an underground cursebreaker."

"Underground?" Vale repeated with an arched brow.

Melanie giggled at his expression. "That means he does it for *other* people," she said in a stage whisper. "Shhh!"

I hoped she wasn't implying that Rodrigo lifted curses for non-magickal beings but I wasn't about to ask and force her to spill even more secrets. She tended to be loud when she revealed things she shouldn't.

"Well, give him a call and get him here yesterday!" I exclaimed.

Melanie pulled out her phone.

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Rodrigo was the same height as Melanie, but he hadn't dyed his hair blue. Any question I had about whether he was also a monkey shapeshifter vanished when he immediately scrambled up onto Moonlight's roof.

"Is that really necessary?" I asked as Vale, Melanie, and I watched this skinny, middle aged man scuttle across my roof. With his black backpack riding high on his shoulders he resembled a crab. "I'm afraid you're going to fall off. I'll be honest: if you do, we can't call an ambulance because then the cops might check the place out and something really bad and magickal might happen."

"Monkeys do not fall, young *amiga*!" Rodrigo called down to me. "We are more agile than cats and stronger than spiders."

I grimaced at the mention of spiders but Melanie was eagerly bobbing her head so I quickly pretended that I was impressed.

Rodrigo was dressed in denim overalls for some reason, like he was a farmer. He went shirtless beneath it, which gave me an unencumbered view of his dense, dark chest hair. He was also barefoot. He had Hobbit feet rather than the long 'monkey toes' I'd been teased as a child about having.

"I work as an independent contractor for ordinary people," he called down to us, his cheerful voice carrying clearly to, oh, pretty much anyone in the neighborhood who happened to be awake. If I'd handed him a megaphone he would have happily used it to tell us about how he used magick for ordinary people who absolutely were not supposed to know anything about real magick. I guesstimated the odds that the Oddsmakers would be paying Rodrigo a visit to be about 2 to 1.

"You'd be surprised how many of them get hit with curses," he went on as he scrambled across the roof.

"I didn't know ordinary people dealt with curses," I admitted.

"Dios mio, too many! Most of them are accidental fallout from sorcerers and warlocks who were sloppy with their spells, and shame on them. You use magick you must respect it, I say. You don't go hitting ordinary people with your spells. All sorts of terrible and unkind things can happen—and they do! Why, I saw—"

"Sorry to cut in," I cut in, "but why did you choose the roof to check out first? You barely looked through the shop and that's where most of the curses are."

"Because, young *amiga*, that curse you have now and the ones you told me about—they are just part of a soup curse."

Vale raised his eyebrows when I looked to him. Melanie didn't appear to have a clue, either.

"What's a soup curse?" I asked reluctantly, braced for a punch line to a lame joke.

"Well, ha ha, it's truly called a chaos curse because it isn't very particular about what it uses. It affects all sorts of objects and places—animals, too—whatever is within reach. Anything that falls into it gets served up, which is why I call it a soup. That's why your curses are all over the place, young *amiga*. Electricity, wasps, flaming money—whoever cast it didn't care what it did, only that it got your attention."

"Well, mission accomplished," I growled. I glanced at the scraggly dead tree in the yard. During the day it was just ugly, but at night it sort of

worried me. It reminded me too much of the tree from *Poltergeist*. I wanted to go back inside. "So what does it being a soup curse have to do with you being on the roof?"

"Because you cast a soup curse at the highest point, so it covers the most area and affects the most things. Think a big umbrella. Or a black magick net." Rodrigo patted his chest and grinned down at me, his teeth flashing whitely beneath his bushy mustache. "So I am on your roof!"

"So you are," I muttered.

"The Oddsmakers might grab him before he does us any good," Vale warned Melanie and me.

But Melanie waved off the concern. "Nah, Rodrigo has been working underground for years! No one cares. I kinda think the Oddsmakers don't mind because at least he's removing proof that magick exists, right? If he left a curse in the hands of someone ordinary, well, then they could call the FBI or Homeland Security and then they'd have a talking coffee pot to study. Rodrigo is making us safer!"

Weird justification, but she could have been right. Rodrigo wasn't exactly hiding what he was doing. The same had been true of my friend Rob, who had used real magick during his stage magic performances in a casino before he was killed in an explosion by Dearborn. The Oddsmakers could have—should have—stepped in both times and they hadn't.

It could be suggested that it showed that the magickal bosses were forgiving and magnanimous. My gut told me they let things slide only if it suited them or it somehow benefited them. Clearly everything I did, including brushing my teeth, did *not* suit the Oddsmakers since they kept snatching me up.

When Rodrigo stood, straddling the very tip top of my roof and yelled, "A-ha!" a pair of dogs, four doors down, began barking.

Beside me, Vale tensed. "What did you find?"

Rodrigo looked down at him and his smile wavered slightly. It strengthened, though, when he looked to me. "Yes, you have a curse here. Soup, like I thought. Made by an old hand." He glanced at Vale again. I guess Rodrigo was intimidated by gargoyle shifters or men, because he quickly addressed only me again. "I haven't seen something like this around Las Vegas, but it is no problem, young *amiga*. I can break it for you. It will be my pleasure. It's okay!"

"Yay!" cheered Melanie. "Good job, Rodrigo!"

"Thank you," I said to him, feeling the weight of the world sliding off my shoulders.

"No problem, young *amiga*." Rodrigo shrugged off his backpack and began pulling things out of it: a Tupperware container full of white stuff that I assumed was salt, a hand mirror, a stick wrapped loosely with string, and other implements I couldn't make out. "It will take me ten minutes."

"Okay. We'll wait for you inside, Rodrigo."

I herded everyone back into the house. I figured we'd hang out in the shop and discuss how I'd ended up with an old, apparently non-local soup curse on my roof, but Vale headed straight for the front door.

"I have to go to California," he said as he paused with the door held open by one hand, his face in profile. "I don't know when I'll be back."

Though I was aware that had been his plan all along, I was a little disappointed that he wasn't interested in figuring out the origin of this curse with me. But whatever. I was a big girl. Badass dragon sorceress, right?

"Can you get a hold of a phone while you're there and tell me what you learn?" I didn't go into detail but I figured Vale understood that I was worried not only about the creature but about the state of Diana's body and whether she'd be able to return her consciousness to it.

"I'll try." He turned then, to look at me fully.

Now, Vale was a serious guy. "Intense", "brooding", and "solemn" were also good adjectives for him. Yes, he could be playful and flirty when the timing was right, but that didn't often occur while other people were present. He was a bit old fashioned in that regard. He definitely wasn't in flirty mode right now. More like, *I'm about to do something of grave importance to the world*. Whether that was actually true or just in his mind was another matter, but I tended to believe him. Vale and hyperbole didn't go together.

"What is it?" I asked him, nervous just from his demeanor. "What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth to reply and I leaned toward him, eager to hear what he had to say. But he must have thought better of it, for he cruelly teased me by shaking his head.

"When I come back," he muttered and then he was nothing but a memory, the door swinging shut behind him.

"He's very dramatic," Melanie observed. She giggled. "It's hot."

Yes, it was hot, but right now I was more worried by his behavior than turned on by it.

I took a seat on the stool behind the counter, listening with half an ear to Rodrigo moving around on the roof. "What do you think about Christian and Diana?"

"They were arguing when I left them. She's kinda bossy, huh? But it's all good. She likes me. I guess she likes monkeys."

I suppressed a laugh. "That must be it." Then I sobered. "What do you think attacked her? And why would it be interested in us?"

"You mean, why is it interested in Vale, don't you?" Melanie, despite being chirpy and hyper-spastic sometimes, was no fool. She leaned against the counter opposite me and played chicken with the zombie nutcrackers, seeing how long she could wait to pull her forefinger from their mouths before they bit her. "He told us that he ran off all his enemies. Remember? That could be true. Whatever went after Christian's mom could be something new, something Vale doesn't know anything about, either."

"He's a gargoyle prince," I blurted. Melanie rewarded me for that bit of truth by leaving her finger too long in a nutcracker's mouth. She yelped when it bit her.

"A—what?" She stuck her injured finger in her mouth but quickly pulled it out again in her excitement. "A prince? Oh, my god, Anne! That means you'll be a princess!"

I slapped a hand over my face. "That's not why I told you. Vale isn't interested in the throne. That's why he's here and not in Europe where the Gargoyle King rules. But him being some sort of royalty is incentive for someone or something to come after him. That could be what we're dealing with here."

She nodded encouragingly. "That totally makes sense, Anne, but I'm sorry—I just can't get over the image of you in a big ball gown and wearing a tiara! I'm so jealous!"

"You're also worthless," I muttered with a roll of my eyes.

"Tell me you hadn't thought of that at least once," she accused.

I pinched my lips together so hard I got a cramp in them. Melanie squealed with laughter.

That was how Rodrigo found us when he entered the house from the back a couple of minutes later.

"Young *amiga*, you are all set," he told me triumphantly. He grinned widely beneath his mustache and spread his arms in a *ta-da* motion. "No more soup for you!"

This guy was a riot.

"You're alright, Rodrigo. What do I owe you? Um, I hope it's not too much." I gave him a sheepish smile. "I probably should have asked you what you charge, first..."

To my relief, he held up his hand, palm out. "No charge for *amigas* of my cousin. And you're from my community. We stick together. Ordinary people—blah, they can pay what I charge them."

"So do you have any guesses as to what or who cast that curse?" I asked him as I walked him to the front door. "None of us, including my friend who just left, has any idea."

I'd mentioned Vale's absence deliberately because I hadn't missed the way Rodrigo had kept looking at him after he'd located the curse on the roof.

"Your good friend, eh?" Rodrigo asked with an uneasy smile as we came to the door.

I shrugged ambiguously. "Just someone I know." Thankfully Melanie didn't blow it, though I could sense her confusion.

Rodrigo scratched at his stubbled chin and then fiddled with one of the straps on his backpack. "You know what he is?"

"He's a gargoyles."

"A long time ago, they used to be demons. Not so much anymore, but the taint of that cold blood...some people think it remains."

"That's just not possible. Gargoyles didn't descend from demons. The demons were created to look like gargoyles in order to hide them in plain sight."

"That's what you think, eh?" Rodrigo shrugged one of those *it's your funeral* kind of shrugs.

"Wait, what do *you* think?" I pressed him.

He studied me closely with his dark eyes. "You and he are not close?"

I held his gaze steadily. "Just tell me. I can handle the truth."

He gave me a different sort of smile, then. It was harder, jaded, making me think that Rodrigo had seen and broken some pretty ugly curses in his career. It was the kind of smile that told me his feeling about Vale wasn't born out of ignorant hysteria.

"That soup curse on your roof? It was cast by an old species from Europe," he told me. "A rare one. I don't say more, but maybe I don't need to." He tipped an imaginary hat. "Good luck, young *amiga*." He waved back into the shop. "Adios, Melanie."

"*Muchas gracias, primo!*"

Rodrigo left me standing in a mild state of shock that quickly turned speculative.

"No way," I said aloud. "No way Vale had anything to do with the curse Rodrigo just broke. It makes zero sense."

Melanie nodded emphatically. "I agree, Anne. Vale likes you. He'd never scare you like that, not to mention why even do it?"

I thought immediately of Vale's older brother, who was next in line for the Gargoyle Throne, but that still didn't satisfy me. For one, the guy didn't know me, and for another, why pick on your younger brother's girlfriend? That'd be a real jerk move. Also, there was the small matter of Vale's brother living in Paris. I'd think if he'd flown all the way to the States, Vale would have known about it. He would have told me.

Wouldn't he?

"No, no, there's something else going on and the key is the attack on Diana. That creature wanted to know about us *and* Vagasso." I punched a fist into my hand. "Melly, it's time we got down and dirty with some critters."

She cringed. "You're making me glad I wore pants."

My smile was a shark's. "Let's rough up some shifters."



## Chapter 4

"This is a bad decision."

I considered Melanie's opinion for a second. "I think the fact that you think it's so bad is exactly why it's the perfect decision."

"Ugh, I knew you'd say that, Anne!"

We were a few blocks from Moonlight, in downtown. The Fremont Street Experience, as it was called, was a five block pedestrian mall that was covered by a 1500 foot long LED roof that played a flashy light and music show seven times a night.

Metro had a visible presence here in the form of yellow-shirted bike cops, so crime was relatively low. Making downtown appear safe had been a big concern when the area had undergone a revitalization to help it compete with the glitzier Strip. For the most part they'd succeeded. To run into the characters that downtown used to be notorious for you now had to deliberately wander away from Fremont Street into the shadowy side streets. In that case you got what was coming to you.

It seemed decently safe, in other words, but only if you were an ordinary person. If you were magickal like Melanie and me, you knew that downtown was where the, let's call them *edgier*, shapeshifters tended to congregate. I couldn't tell you with authority why they preferred this area to the Strip or any other part of Vegas, though I had a theory.

Downtown was where the last of the oldest casinos were located. The residue of chance magick was thicker on these relics than on the new, mega resorts on the Strip. That residue was aging, like wine or balsamic vinegar, growing richer and more potent. While I didn't think you could tap into specific pools of magick to perform your spells or whatnot, I did think you could feel the difference, like standing in the shade versus in direct sunlight. Standing in downtown just felt good.

But congregating in one place was supposed to be a big no-no for magickal beings. Eventually, ordinary people began to sense our presence,

sort of like how you didn't pay much attention to a smoker standing beside you until suddenly there were a dozen of them puffing away. The shapeshifters who were comfortable defying authority hung out on Fremont Street soaking up the vintage chance magick there despite the risk of drawing attention to themselves.

I couldn't identify any of them as Melanie and I walked past the old casinos, but I rarely could even within Moonlight. Nonetheless, I was nervous, my skin prickly like eyes were jabbing me. Though logically I knew it made no sense, I couldn't help feeling that other magickal beings could recognize *me*.

"Where are we going, exactly?" Melanie muttered from the corner of her mouth.

I pointed. "There."

Up ahead and on the right, glowing softly like a secret, hung the turquoise blue neon sign for a bar called Elemental Entities. The outside was sheathed in brick and mortar, the single window blackened with tint. Entwined letter 'E's were painted in gold script on the door that I held open for Melanie.

Inside it was dark as was to be expected, and fairly busy. I didn't sense any magick, but of course I wouldn't unless someone wanted a date with the Oddsmakers. Men and women, mostly in their 20's and 30's, looked me over with interest and ultimately dismissed me and Melanie because we wore casual clothing fit for eating hot wings. Everyone else seemed to be dressed up for a night of clubbing. Many were drinking from glasses with light up ice cubes in them, something you only ever saw in party bars.

The bar itself was visually exciting: a long, jaggedly cut block of acrylic that was illuminated from beneath by blue light so that it resembled a chunk of glacier ice. Melanie oohed and ahed over it as we approached, while I tried to play it cool, though why I had no idea. The people in here weren't the ones I needed to impress.

When we reached the bar I leaned on it until I caught the eye of the bartender, who wore a pale blue tuxedo shirt with a black bowtie. Too bad Orlaton wasn't old enough to drink yet. He and his predilection for bowties would have fit right in here.

"How's it going, ladies?" The bartender slung a pair of cocktail napkins in front of us. He was blond and cute. Both of his ears were

pierced multiple times. Upon looking closer, I saw that they weren't your typical adornments. I recognized bits of bone and carved stones, the former etched with runes. Possibly they were protection charms, but my money was on them being charms to encourage bigger tips.

I checked out the room again but no one appeared to be paying me and Melanie any attention. We looked too much like tourists who hadn't packed the right outfits for our trip.

"Is the Keyhole still operating?" I asked the bartender, keeping my voice low so it wouldn't carry.

Beside me, Melanie groaned.

The bartender's expression altered: shuttering slightly as his eyes narrowed. "Who's asking?"

"A pair of family members."

"If you have to ask about it then maybe you're not supposed to know about it."

"Or maybe we haven't had the need to use it until now," I retorted. "We have something important to discuss with Mr. Kleure. Not that it's any of your business."

Not much of the disdain on his face faded, but his fingertips, which were pressed to the bar top, whitened just slightly at my gratuitous name-dropping.

"It's still operating," he said tightly "I won't tell you how to find it."

"You don't have to," I said, smiling sweetly at him. "Come on, Mel."

With my head held high, I pushed away from the bar and began making my way toward the restrooms in back. Melanie followed so closely behind she clipped my right foot and gave me a flat tire.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"It's fine," I gritted out as I hopped on one foot while pulling my shoe out from under my heel. So much for looking cool.

Shoe fixed, we made it to the back of the room. The restrooms were on the other side of a partition which cordoned off a little alcove area holding a bank of six video poker machines. Five of them were working but one machine had an Out of Order sign taped to the front of it.

"I didn't realize this was the Keyhole," Melanie hissed as I moved to stand in front of the broken poker machine. "This is sooo dangerous, Anne! We're going to be chewed up and spit out."

"Maybe. Maybe not. We're a couple of tough cookies, remember? You used the power of the dead to pick your monkey nose."

She snorted with laughter. "That necromancy artifact was the worst. Talk about smelling my finger. I did! Blech!"

While Melanie distracted herself by cracking herself up, I pressed the first two Hold buttons on the broken machine. The playing cards on the screen flipped as though a new hand had been dealt, showing me a royal flush in spades. I pushed the Hold button for the ace of spades and then the Cash Out button. A panel in the wall to my and Melanie's right slid open.

She gaped at the opening. "How did you know how to do that?"

"Because I'm cool, duh. Now listen, Melly. We've got to be careful in there. Let me do the talking. No matter how much you want to, do *not* butt in, okay? I need you to watch my back while I'm dealing with whoever I end up dealing with. Got it?"

She squared her shoulders. "Monkey's got your six!"

I blinked at her. "Where'd you hear that?"

"From the movies!"

"You dork." I patted her on the head before turning and ducking inside the opening.

It must have been activated to close as quickly as possible because it nearly chopped off Melanie's feet, forcing her to leap at me with a high pitched yelp. I caught her and staggered backward into the room. My butt bounced off a table and I heard the clink of glassware a moment before something cold soaked into the seat of my shorts.

"Watch it!"

"Sorry," I blurted to the table's occupant before I twisted around to see who it was.

It was my turn to gape.

The teenager—I could see that she must be around Orlaton's age—was no ordinary teen. She existed in a state of half-transformation, her acne spotted face surrounded by a crown of sleek brown feathers that poured in a waterfall down the back of her head and over her neck and collarbones to the boatneck top she wore. Her arms were bare but the hands that mopped at the spill I'd made weren't hands; her arms ended in knobby toes with talons. The talons were painted pink.

"Owl," Melanie whispered, again, too loudly. "She's an owl shifter. How cool!"

I agreed. I didn't often see bird shifters, much less owls, in mid-shift like this girl. Did it hurt? Did your brain need to make an extra effort to parse commands and respond to impulses sent from the different species body parts?

Intrigued, I lifted my gaze to take in the room and the rest of its occupants. The Keyhole was a speakeasy for shapeshifters, a fact which was obvious once you got a look at the clientele. It was a veritable zoo and it sort of smelled like one, what with all the fur and feathers on display. But there was also the scent of perfume and cologne because not every shifter here was in their magickal form. Some, like this young owl, had chosen to shift only partway.

Cool, ambient lighting in blues and purples glowed on huge, curving horns and wings made of feathers and leathery skin. Movement made the light dance off scales both small and large, creating a continuous series of rainbows leaping throughout the room. The music was low and the conversation was strange: hisses, grunts, and chirps all caught by swiveling, oftentimes furred, ears. The floor and the spaces between chairs and sofas were alive with the movement of tails. Lots and lots of tails. They wagged, wiggled, and slithered.

Layout-wise, the room mirrored the regular bar outside, though it was much more crowded, which gave it the impression of being narrower. Nothing like a shoebox full of strange creatures that evidently weren't intimidated by the Oddsmakers. A gathering place like this shouldn't exist according to the magickal bosses, but apparently enforcing that unspoken rule had fallen by the wayside. Why? Was it to keep the peace and allow the shifters the illusion of free will? Or did the Oddsmakers fear an uprising if they tried to step in? That seemed silly to me after having sort of met the Oddsmakers and seen how inexplicably powerful they were. They had nothing to fear from these creatures.

The bar here was manned by a woman wearing the same uniform as the guy out front. Here, her drinks were being made with magick. As I approached the bar with Melanie tucked in close behind and helpfully concealing my wet butt, the bartender finished mixing something that bubbled wildly and formed glittering butterflies above the lip of the glass. Other patrons' drinks seemed to be similarly enhanced. They self-iced, leaked smoke that curled into shapes, or in a few cases appeared to be bottomless no matter how much was consumed.

We sidled up to the bar between a pair of women who were fox shifters in mid-shift and a big, white wolf that sat at the base of the bar and surveyed the room with pale blue eyes. The bartender was too busy with other orders to notice us which was fine. Melanie and I weren't here for a good time.

Our entrance had garnered a longer look from the patrons this time since it wasn't our attire that anyone here cared about, only our magick. Melanie was always kind of squirrely, so maybe the more perceptive shifters might have guessed that she was a monkey shifter. None would be able to guess that I was a dragon sorceress except maybe those who were also descended from dragons (read: Chinese) or older magickal beings who seemed to have a knack for sensing things like that, such as the host of the room, the person we were here to see.

Kleure was pretty unmistakable as a magickal being. For one thing, he was a huge black dog, larger even than a Great Dane. For another, he had leathery wings and a halo of blue flames around his head. Oddly, a little yellow canary perched on one shoulder.

Panting happily in the booth around him sat half a dozen dogs that looked like mutts, though I assumed they must also be shifters.

"Remember what I said," I murmured to Melanie. "Let me handle it and keep an eye on the room."

"Okay," she whispered back nervously. I think she would have held my hand had I allowed it, but I trusted her to watch out for us. A monkey might be small, but they could be scrappy little buggers.

We sidestepped hooves and paws and carefully tiptoed over flickering tails, all while being watched by dozens of eyes. Was it my imagination or had the volume in the room dimmed as we made our way across the room?

*If you look like you're paranoid, they'll think you're up to no good.*

I pulled back my shoulders slightly, trying to project both confidence and nonchalance. No easy feat when things were growling around you. Finally we reached Kleure's booth. To my relief, he transformed into a wiry, black-haired man with bright blue eyes. Well, eyes with blue flames in them, which was close enough. Of course he was naked, but the table hid everything from the waist down so I was fine with being subjected to his hairy chest. His had nothing on Rodrigo's.

"I know you," he said in a straining voice, like he was unused to pushing air out of his mouth in ways that didn't form barks or howls. The canary continued to sit on his shoulder, watching me with tiny black eyes. "You're Anne Moody, proprietress of the Moonlight Pawn Shop. Daughter of Iris and Jacob, long deceased."

My smile was forced. Being known, even within my own community, wasn't ideal when your magickal familiar was an apex predator with a storied history of burning villages to the ground. You kind of wanted to fly under the radar on that one.

"Hello, Mr. Kleure. I'm flattered you know who I am," I lied. "Of course I know all about *you*. Everyone does."

"Everyone in the casino business," he agreed, baring his teeth in a smile reminiscent of a dog's snarl. It wasn't a threatening action, just not particularly pleasant to look at.

"Business has been good lately, yes?" I prompted.

Kleure inclined his head. "Better than ever. More casinos are being built every year. More casinos mean more gaming tables and slots, which mean more gamblers and more demand for my pets."

The pit-terrier seated at the end of the booth licked its chops and went back to panting with its wide, sloppy grin. I tried to imagine what sort of person the dog shifted into and decided it was some muscle-y Jersey type.

"That's right. You rent 'pets' to the casinos," I said. "As lucky charms."

"Correction, my pets are influential."

"Right. Because they make people lucky."

"Correction again, Anne: they make people *feel* lucky. A very big difference where the Oddsmakers are concerned." Kleure growled softly for a few seconds and then licked his lips like he was licking his chops: with his entire tongue. "They bind us with rules like we're children. They tell us we are prohibited from affecting the gaming odds in any way. Why do you think that is?"

"Because eventually it would be noticed by the non-magickals. They use computers to test the odds. They'd know the moment something wasn't right, and then they'd investigate. That would lead them to us. All of us."

"No!" Kleure barked out. He literally barked it. "The Oddsmakers don't fear that. They change the odds when it suits them. Why are they the exceptions to their own rules?"

Uneasy, I shook my head. "I couldn't tell you." Nor did I want to hazard a guess.

"We are treated like criminals. If we break their pointless rules we face a punishment of death or, if you're fortunate, an irreversible loss of your magick. Funny, isn't it, that the best outcome when you're dealing with the Oddsmakers is to lose the very essence of who you are?"

I said nothing. The Keyhole wasn't a pro-Oddsmakers environment. While I mostly agreed with their resentment of the magickal bosses, I wasn't stupid enough to say as much aloud. Not while the Oddsmakers continued to foster their unhealthy habit of kidnapping me and dragging me to their underground lair.

"What I and my pets do is encourage humans to play," Kleure went on, calmer. "Nothing more. A gambler walks by any one of my pets and suddenly he feels lucky. He feels he has a chance. Whether those players win or lose after that point is not my concern. My job is only to provide the impetus for gamblers to take a seat and pull out their money. That's all the casinos want. Players. "

"So when someone says they've got a 'feeling', the truth is that they've probably brushed elbows with one of these guys." I motioned at the dogs. "Or girls."

"Exactly. It's a very positive, uplifting business." Kleure bared his teeth again.

I'd buy the London Bridge before I believed him. Kleure was a mischief maker who'd learned to adapt his particular skillset to Las Vegas. He was an old being. Stories of him as Kludde had gone around Europe for ages where he had lured travelers into the woods where they'd wandered lost for days. Now he was here, making bank off his hobby of screwing with humans.

Nevertheless, how he made his money wasn't my concern. It was just small talk before I launched into the nitty gritty.

"Obviously you're a huge success and that's probably brought you into contact with a lot of—"

"Tell me who you're asking about, Anne. You've wasted enough of my time already."



I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder. That was why I'd brought Melanie. Instead I focused on Kleure, who no longer looked friendly.

"A creature," I began, "which my sources say is likely a shifter, has been asking about me. They've gone so far as to threaten to torture a friend of mine in order to get that information. I don't appreciate that. I don't appreciate it at all. I want to know who it is."

"So you may kill them?"

The blunt question didn't throw me at all. "We'll see."

The blue flames in his eyes flickered. "A predator after my own heart. Though of course I'd *never* hurt another living soul."

The dogs in the booth made weird chuffing noises and two of them yipped. I took that to be canine laughter.

"Do you know who it is?" I pressed. The atmosphere in the Keyhole was beginning to weigh on my nerves, as though the walls and everything within them were moving closer. I tried to recall the largest shifters I'd seen in my quick scan of the place: there had been wolves, but any larger predators? Any bears or lions? I couldn't pull them up in my memory.

"Before I answer your question," Kleure drawled, "I'd like to know why you believe I would help you."

I held his flaming gaze. "Because we're on the same side."

I made it an ambiguous statement on purpose. The same side could mean anything—we were both predators, we were both magickal beings, neither of us spent a lot of time around cats...I'd let him decide.

"I'm not your friend, Anne." Kleure leaned forward. "In fact...no one here is your friend. Not while you're the lapdog of the Oddsmakers."

Crap. I hadn't considered that anyone here might know of my involvement with the big bosses.

My laugh was awkward and uneasy. "You're joking, right? You think I'm friends with those freaks? That I ever did anything for them willingly? Please."

He flared in a big blue ball of flame, prompting me to jerk back from the table. But the fire had no heat. It was supernatural. It died down to reveal him in his natural form again. The big black dog looked rabid to me, and the orb of blue fire around his head didn't make him any more appealing. The slow flap of his leathery wings seemed ominous. Even the yellow canary on his shoulder resembled a small, angry fireball.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he asked in a snarling voice that was even more difficult to understand than his human one had been.

"On the contrary," I shot back. "I figured you'd be smart enough to recognize when someone chooses to do something and when they're bullied into it. I want nothing to do with the Oddsmakers, but they refuse to take the hint. They're the worst ex-boyfriends anyone's ever had."

"You sound suitably angry, but the truth is your family's dragons have served as weapons of the Oddsmakers for quite some time."

I was so shocked that for a second I couldn't speak. Finally, I sputtered out, "That's a lie!"

"Ancient history is not your friend, Anne, but when your family had the opportunity to rewrite it, your mother chose to carry on tradition."

I shook my head in frustration. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The blue flared brighter. "I don't know why you're really here, but you shouldn't have come."

"Anne..." Melanie murmured, her voice rising. "Some of them are standing!"

This was going down worse than I'd feared. Although I'd mentally prepared myself to be the butt of some backlash simply from possessing a dragon familiar, something worse was happening and I had no idea how or why.

I held my hands out, placating. "Look, let's all calm down. I'm not here to pick a fight, Mr. Kleure."

Kleure snapped his jaws together. "It appears as though you may be involved in one nonetheless."

"I only want information about—"

*"Anne!"*

I spun. Melanie wouldn't have screamed unless it was something worth putting my back to Kleure.

It was.

People and animals had leaped out of their chairs to avoid the path of four wolves of varying colors that were barreling across the room straight for me and Melanie. There was no stopping to talk them down. I reached into that rumbley place behind my breast bone and out came Lucky like a magic trick.

Some trick. He blasted into the middle of the room like a mini sun, his golden body blazing so brightly it forced the four wolves to flinch back, their paws and nails scuttling clumsily across the tile floor, sending the shifters sliding into each other and crashing into the nearest tables and chairs.

I heard shouts of "dragon!", and they weren't the kind that made me want to smile and wave in acknowledgment. These were shouts of fear, even a touch of resentment. I got it. The fear of sorcery like mine was part of the reason magickal beings were forced to hide their magick from non-magickals in the first place. Lucky and I presented a danger to the world that I doubted any amount of campaigning on my part would change.

So I used it to my advantage.

I had Lucky go big. Super monstrous, holy moly big. Bigger than he'd been in Moonlight. His golden scaled body filled the room, forcing the shifters to crouch down beneath tables or smash up against each other at the walls. And he was so bright that no one could keep their eyes open. Everyone either squinted or covered their faces.

It could have ended like that, with me and Melanie squeezing our way out of there while Lucky held everyone in check.

But there was always someone, wasn't there? One guy who had to play the hero.

Or in this case, the villain.

It turned out to be Kleure.

He jumped onto my back. I screamed because if you've never had a giant dog with a flaming blue head land on your back—let's just say it's a pretty terrifying experience. The weight of him pulled me backward so together we crashed onto the table, making the drinks there explode into the air around us and soak the rest of my clothing.

His sharp teeth snapped at the air beside my ear and his breath—talk about dog breath! Kleure smelled like he'd just eaten cat poop. I gagged even as I struggled to draw in air, even awful-smelling air. His furry forelegs had wrapped around my throat and he was on the way to strangling me unconscious if he didn't manage to tear my throat out first, which he was trying to do as well.

I punched over my shoulder, hitting him square in the muzzle. He let out a yelp, helpfully telling me I was on target. So I did it again, harder. The moment his forelegs loosened I hurled myself forward, breaking his

grip. Just in time, too, because his dog shifter buddies dove at the table, their canines just missing my arms and torso.

I threw a quick glance over the room before me. Melanie had shifted to her monkey form at some point, ditching her steampunk gear which had been kicked to all corners of the club. Her monkey was on the floor, wrestling with a tabby cat and an evil-looking Siamese. Bits of fur filled the air. The screeching and screaming hurt my ears.

More worrisome was what I saw attempting to squeeze beneath Lucky's coils. It was a Bengal tiger. It was absolutely stunning and it absolutely frightened me because a big predator like that wouldn't go down easily. It would keep attacking until I had no choice but to give Lucky his head. Everything I'd feared happening in Moonlight was going to happen here.

Running from fate had never felt so futile.

I fed Lucky a little more energy and simultaneously experienced that unnerving sensation of scales rippling across my skin and the need to cough out embers. Lucky belched a streamer of fire that curled and roiled across the ceiling of the speakeasy. Screams of terror filled the place. Those shifters who'd been pressed to the walls by Lucky's bulk now slid along his body, making their way urgently for the room's single exit. I ordered Lucky to relax his body and allow them to run past and soon, a steady stream of creatures was on their way out.

I hoped they remembered to shift forms before ordinary people saw them. Come to think of it, they'd all be naked. They'd better be heading to the back alley exit instead!

But magickal streakers swiftly became the least of my concerns. The tiger was still coming and I faced danger nearer still: jaws closed around my left forearm. I spun, flinging a terrier off me that flew across the room and skittered across tabletops. A pit bull scrambled up on the booth's table, its powerful muscles bunching as it prepared to launch itself at me.

"Stop them or I'll burn them all!" I shouted at Kleure, who was crouched at the edge of the booth, his claws digging into the black vinyl, his wings arrowed back like swords. The canary on his shoulder flared its wings, trying to look larger.

"I'm a dragon, Kleure! I don't care how many I kill!"

Please fear me! I thought at him and the other shifters. *I don't want to fight with sorcery. I don't want to lose control!*

My heart was a drum, its beat giving life to Lucky. I could hear the seductive call of my ancient blood, coaxing me to join my ancestors in revealing my true self. In reveling in it. I heard the clicking of tiger claws coming up fast behind me. I watched the pit bull lower its head and coil its muscles.

"Let us go!" I shouted. My voice cracked as I warned, "I'll end you all! The Oddsmakers won't stop me!"

But mentioning the Oddsmakers was a mistake.

"We're not afraid you," Kleure snarled back, flecks of spittle flying from his jaws. "We'll take down the Oddsmakers and you'll fall right alongside them, Anne Moody. You're nothing but a traitor. All traitors deserve to *die!*"

I cried out in dismay as he hurled himself out of the booth, followed by the bodies of the other canine shifters. Behind me, something huge and fast rushed up.

My mouth opened into a roar. I felt my teeth elongate into fangs as pressure and heat built up in my chest. I uncurled my tongue to spray out fire—

The world flipped. Gravity seemed to reverse, and I went flying into the air as a monster roared...

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I'd never been happier to be grabbed by the Oddsmakers. Once I recognized the twisted Sistine Chapel-like images above me, I rolled to my feet. Frightened chattering was my only warning before a little monkey leaped into my arms. I hugged Melanie close as I looked around the spooky, cavernous room.

The unexplainable black curtains were there as usual, occasionally emitting puffs of black spores or poison or who knew what. The images on the ceiling above were still moving, still tearing each other to pieces in slow motion. What was new was Kleure, who crouched on the concrete floor like a terrified puppy, his head twisting back and forth as he tried to take in the madness of this place.

"What happened? Wh-Where are we?" Kleure stuttered, his fear making his speech nearly indecipherable. The yellow canary had come with him and it huddled tight against his thick dog neck for protection.

I opened my mouth to say something snarky but that creepy girl's voice beat me to it.

"Welcome to the home of your enemy, Kleure of the Wood."

He startled with a yip, leathery wings fluttering. Even the blue flame halo around his head seemed to dim in his terror as a humanoid shape stepped up behind one of the waving black curtains. I knew there was nothing physical behind the curtain, that it was only a weird illusion, but Kleure acted as I had, assuming that a being actually stood there and was speaking to him.

"I'm important in the community," he said to the cloth-covered figure. "I'm important to Las Vegas. To the casinos. You can't—"

"Dare you presume to tell us what we can and cannot do?"

The maniacally sweet voice made Melanie's small body shiver in my arms and her tail latch tight around my wrist. I covered her protectively.

"We oversee all beings within this city, Kleure of the Wood. Even those who refuse to be overseen. Even those who resist, and cannot be made to behave."

I expected Kleure to continue cowering in light of such a statement, but to my amazement he did the opposite. He straightened and tipped his large, triangular head back. He spread his wings. If it were possible, he looked almost regal, like a supernatural dog king. Even the little canary stopped hiding and gave an angry, defiant chirp.

"There will be others to overthrow you," Kleure snarled. His canines showed wetly and his eyes gleamed dangerously. "You haven't beaten down the denizens of this city. The more you attempt to suppress us, the stronger and more powerful we grow. You have your sheep—" he sent a glare my way that stiffened my spine, "—but you will never rule over all of us. *You will never break us.*"

It was an admirable resistance, but for as much as I disliked the Oddsmakers, I didn't see the point of it. As Vale had once told me, it was wiser to pick your battles. Here, alone, Kleure couldn't win.

"You think we are not aware," Kleure went on mysteriously, "but we *are* aware of what you're planning. You're not nearly half as clever as

you think you are. It's only a matter of time before—"

"Your threats bore and insult us."

The Oddsmakers didn't sound intimidated at all, yet I was intrigued. What had Kleure meant when he'd said the Oddsmakers were planning something?

I imagined I could hear Vale's voice in my head, warning me to stay out of it. But that only goaded me to pay more attention. No one was about to pat me on the head and tell me to keep quiet or not get involved. Not that Vale would ever dare, but the Oddsmakers might...

"We have given you every opportunity to fall in line and preserve the good health and well-being of the magickal community in Las Vegas and yet you have consistently defied us. For too long you have stirred the pot of discontent and beat upon the drums in your attempt to incite an uprising."

A breeze moved through the room, lifting the curtain and revealing only air behind it. The cloth settled once more over the humanoid head and chest, but I could see that Kleure now recognized he wasn't dealing with a person. He realized as I once had that the Oddsmakers were "other" and, as they'd claimed, *legion*.

"You cannot be allowed to continue, Kleure of the Wood."

Goose bumps jumped out across my skin. Melanie, clutching me tight, must have felt my fear for she shuddered violently.

Kleure, though, stood strong. "You will never silence us. My voice is only one of a chorus of outrage and—"

"We agree. You will continue to send a message, but not the one you intended."

Kleure turned to look at me then. His look of calm condemnation said, *This is all on you. This is what you support.*

I didn't have time to feel outraged or defensive. The Oddsmakers acted too quickly for that.

I knew as soon as it began that I would never forget what I saw. Nor would I forget the sounds, both of the physical atrocities that were perpetrated upon Kleure, and of his screaming. I held Melanie's monkey head tight against my belly so she wouldn't see the worst of it, but I forced myself not to look away, not even to blink. The longer it went on, the greater grew my fierce need to witness all of it. So I wouldn't be able to

pretend afterward that I hadn't understood what was happening. So I wouldn't be able to look in the mirror and see an innocent.

Because I wasn't innocent. Not while I stood silently by and did nothing to stop this.

When it was over and what remained of Kleure lay smoking on the floor of that place, I tried to swallow, but my mouth and throat were as dry as the valley. There was a ringing in my ears, but it was only the vestiges of Kleure's agony and terror.

Something whimpered. When I looked down and realized I was on the verge of crushing Melanie to death, I immediately unclenched the muscles in my arms. My entire body felt like it had been balled tight to survive a tumble down a cliff.

"Why did you...do that?" I choked out. I wanted to cry in sheer rage.

"So they would all learn," the sickly sweet voice replied. "Have you learned?"

I wanted—needed—to scream, but I didn't. "Why did you do it *that* way? Why be—" I fought back a shriek, "*—monsters?*"

"Because for those who feel the need to fight, only the most dramatic of examples will kill that need."

It was a warning as much for me as for the sort of shapeshifters who frequented downtown and the Keyhole. I liked to mouth off against the Oddsmakers because it made me feel like I was showing my independence. But Vale had warned me again and again not to push them. I now realized it wasn't because he'd been tortured by them, or at least that wasn't the only reason. He understood what they were capable of. He appreciated how utterly cruel and sadistic they could be.

Movement near what had been Kleure made me suck in my breath. I watched, heart pounding, as the yellow canary settled on the floor beside the remains. It chirped pitifully, its pain unmistakable. I wanted to scoop the little bird up and protect it just as I tried to protect Melanie. I didn't care that it had once been an associate of Kleure and might have tried to peck my eyes out in a fight. I wanted no more death and suffering tonight.

"Tell them what happened here, little bird. Spread the information far and wide: the Oddsmakers exist to keep the peace and to keep you safe. To fight us is to fight the well-being of every magickal being in Las Vegas."

The figure beneath the black cloth turned my way. *"Is that understood, Anne Moody?"*

My head throbbed and my vision edged with red. Had Melanie and the canary not been present, I would have burned us all to ash. "I understand perfectly."

I didn't try to hide my outrage and fury. But nothing was said to me, and when the pain at the back of my head came it was welcome, because it removed me from that place where I would have gladly surrendered my humanity in order to make a point.

When I opened my eyes again I was in the desert, lying somewhere outside Area 51. It wasn't fully dark; the sky in the east was edging into orange. Sunset was coming. Maybe it would hold back the nightmares.

"Anne..."

I sat up time to catch Melanie as she flung herself against me. She was naked, which sucked because we didn't have easy access to clothing out here, but at least she was alive.

"I wish I hadn't seen that," she whispered, clutching me hard. "That was the worst thing I've ever seen."

I swallowed down fire. "Me, too."

"All those times you said they took you there—it never really occurred to me that they would hurt you. Not after the first time. I thought...they must like you." She tilted her tear-streaked face back to look up at me. "But that could have been you."

"Maybe."

There was no lying to make her feel better. Not where the Oddsmakers were concerned. They were capricious and evil, and I abandoned any thoughts that what they did for us was a good thing. I wish I'd never learned about Dearborn's necromancy artifact. I wish I hadn't listened to Vale and I wish I'd tried to fight them. I didn't care if they killed me; I was sure I could take a few of them down before they did.

But that fight would have to come another day, when it was just me and them, with my friends far away.

I considered what I was wearing. It wasn't much. "Listen, we're going to have to hitchhike back. Are you okay with staying in your monkey form the whole time?"

She sniffed and nodded. "It'll be easier."

I got the feeling she meant more than the ease of travel. Maybe her thoughts formed differently when she was a monkey. I didn't know. I didn't ask.

We both turned at a nearby rustle of movement. It was only the yellow canary, rising up from behind a tumbleweed. It hovered in the air for a few seconds, maybe orienting itself. Maybe trying to find the strength to fly after all that had happened. Then it turned and flew swiftly in the direction where the city must be. Hopefully an eagle wouldn't try to eat it along the way.

With a monkey literally on my back, I began the trek to the highway. With luck, sunrise would bring an increase in traffic. Otherwise, it was going to be a long, grim day with nothing to do but think thoughts I shouldn't be thinking.

Chapter 5

Melanie stayed with me in Moonlight, her fear of teeth in the mattress overruled by her fear of being snatched by the Oddsmakers. Together we listened to the footsteps of the ghost on the roof until we passed out from sheer mental and emotional exhaustion.

I slept fitfully, my dreams plagued by fire-breathing dragons and mutating dogs. I watched a monkey falling into a pit while I was bound by chains and couldn't grab for it. The chains were held by a gargoyle, but one that didn't look like Vale. It was monstrous. It called me by name. It called me *traitor*...

It was Melanie's phone that woke us both. It was her father, asking her to drive the Todos Tortas truck. Though puffy-eyed, I could tell that Melanie was glad for the job. It was something to do, a slice of life that had nothing to do with being magickal or being ruled by the Oddsmakers.

"Tell Vale," she urged me as I walked her through the front yard. She wore a pair of my shorts and one of my tops. "He's gotta know, Anne!"

I nodded, but I didn't say anything. I wasn't sure what to do about Vale, but my indecisiveness wasn't anything that Melanie needed to know about. It'd take her awhile to get over her first encounter with the Oddsmakers as it was.

As soon as she was gone, I took a shower and dressed quickly. It was just after noon, so the sun was an angry, blazing god in the sky but I welcomed its burn on my cheeks as I walked across the street. I imagined it was burning away any lingering taint from the Oddsmakers' lair, cleansing me.

Not a chance.

I looked around me once or twice as I approached the Greek revival house. If shifters or pixies were watching me I couldn't tell. If *I* were the Oddsmakers, I'd be watching my every move. If I were one of Kleure's

pals, I'd be planning a retaliatory ambush. But in spite of my expectations, I reached the shop unharmed.

Tomes was a bookstore specializing in the occult. It was well-known throughout the magickal community both for its extensive collection and for providing a safe venue for performing rituals. I wasn't exactly thrilled to have occultists calling up dead guys and other entities directly across the street from me, but compared to a crack house for a neighbor it wasn't so bad. I rang the doorbell with my fingers crossed that no one was inside summoning Norwegian serial killers like the last time.

When no one answered, I tried the doorbell again, a sense of disquiet building at the base of my spine. Orlaton had to be home. The guy wasn't the partying type or even the go out for Jack in the Box type. Why wasn't he answering?

When a full two minutes passed, I cautiously tried the door. Unsurprisingly, it was locked. But if I'd been able to steal a car and start it, I could open a locked door. Assuming, that is, it wasn't booby trapped or otherwise protected by magick. Which it probably was. At the very least I was aware that Tomes was protected by wards that repelled dark spirits. Did the wards also deny dragon sorceresses? I was about to find out.

I called up Lucky as a wisp as thin as a bobby pin and sent him into the keyhole of the lock. Consciously, I told him to open the lock, but I had no idea how that would be achieved just as I'd had no idea how to start a car engine. But Lucky had something of an intelligence, enough for something like this.

I soon heard the soft click of the lock opening. I tried the door and was able to push it in. Though I was afraid this might be some sort of test to see how much of a nosy neighbor I was, I quietly entered the shop.

Tomes was huge inside, easily outclassing any "normal" bookstore I'd ever entered. I wouldn't have been surprised if Orlaton admitted that magick was behind it. Aisles and aisles of bookshelves stuffed full of old and dirty books stretched every which way back into darkness. It was a veritable maze of bookshelves, with a good chance there was some grizzled Minotaur camping out somewhere within it. The place stank of leather, rotting paper, and sage, the latter which was burned for purification purposes. I headed for the very center of the shop to the rotunda where rituals were often held. I was relieved to see that today the area was empty.

Rugs covered the floor. I resisted the urge to lift up the edge of one to see if the wood floors still held the scratches from the exorcism rite we'd attempted to perform on Vale. It wasn't my fondest memory, to say the least. I was amused to note the rearing dragon statue that now sat in place of the manticore one that I had destroyed that night.

"I always knew you were a sucker for dragons, Orlaton," I said to myself as I walked up to it and ran my fingers along a bronze wing. It was a European dragon, so visually it wasn't much like my dragon, but that was just nitpicking. Melanie had joked that Orlaton had a crush on me. Maybe she wasn't wrong. Or maybe the dragon had been the only statue on sale the day Orlaton had gone shopping for a replacement.

I stood for a long moment, ears straining to hear sounds of movement. Just when I was about to deem the place empty, I heard the distant rustle of cloth.

"Orlaton?" I called out.

To my surprise, the sound of a faint moan drifted to me from between the stacks.

Oh, great.

I followed the sound, my heart rate picking up its pace. I wasn't in the mood for any more scary surprises. I was tempted to turn around and walk out. But of course that wasn't an option. Not after standing by and doing nothing while Kleure was taught his lesson.

Emerging from the stacks, I came upon Orlaton sitting sprawled on the floor. His legs were extended in front of him and his hands lay slack between them. Books lay scattered around him, disgorged from one of the shelves that had been tipped over. It had hit the wall with one corner, keeping it suspended at a sixty degree angle to the floor.

I hurried around to kneel by Orlaton's side. His chin nearly touched his chest but his eyes were open, staring ahead.

"Is it...is it closed?" he whispered.

"Is what closed?"

"The...menace."

Frowning, I traced his line of sight to the old metal trunk that was partially hidden in the shadow cast by the tipped over bookshelf. The trunk appeared old and weathered, with rusted metal bands wrapped around it. It would be the perfect decoration at a pirate-themed party. When Orlaton had pointed it out to me previously, it was to illustrate the danger of

working with dark magick. But he'd been vague, not actually telling me what was so frightening about the thing.

That vagueness should have spurred me to write it off, however sometimes you didn't need a threat to be spelled out for you to recognize its danger. And that was the case with this trunk. The haunted look on Orlaton's face as he'd explained how he'd only barely bested whatever was contained inside it had stuck with me like a ghost story.

Orlton was seventeen, but he dressed and acted like he was fifty years-old. His maturity was unnerving. So was his general appearance, which was of a pale, thin man with an overly large head and eyes. When he was afraid, like now, he resembled the figure in Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*.

A sense of terror was climbing up my spine. It was exacerbated when I noticed that the big padlock that normally bound the trunk now lay open on the floor alongside two chains and two smaller locks that must have been recent additions. I'd thought the big lock was only a visual deterrent to keep the curious from opening the trunk, but maybe I was wrong. I could feel the ominous tickle along my senses that told me the magickal locks on the thing had been recently opened as well.

"Orlton, I think it's open," I hissed urgently. "How did it get open?"

He chuckled weakly. "I wanted to see if it was still active."

"You couldn't have just kicked it?"

He rolled his blue eyes up at me impatiently. The Orlton I knew and sorta liked was coming back. "It's not a puppy in a crate, Miss Moody."

"How would I know? You've never told me what's in there."

Frustratingly, he didn't rise to the bait. "No, and you don't need to know. Help me to stand."

I hooked one of his thin arms around my shoulders and helped him to his feet. After a few seconds he pushed me away, determined to stand on his own, which he did, albeit like a scarecrow battered by gusting winds. It bothered me to see him wipe a trickle of blood from his bottom lip where he must have bitten himself.

The color had returned to his cheeks but he still looked sickly to me. Granted, Orlton's default look wasn't exactly sunny and healthy but he looked worse now, like one of the kids from *The Flowers in the Attic*.

"It called to me," he murmured as he stared at the trunk with equal parts fascination and horror. "It tricked me. How could it trick me?"

I felt itchy all over, and kept glancing over my shoulders at the shadows. "Jesus, Orlaton, would you just tell me what it is already?"

He turned to me then, and it was like locking gazes with a prisoner of war. "Why would you want that nightmare in your head?" he asked me softly.

"Damn you." I rubbed ferociously at my arms, trying to rub away the goose bumps that had broken over my skin. "I'm your neighbor, you know. I think I have a right to know if something godawful is across the street from me."

"And what would you do about it if you knew?" he challenged me.

He had a point. I wasn't ready to close up Moonlight Pawn just yet. Not even for mysterious pirate trunks.

"Maybe I'd bolster my defenses or something," I mumbled.

"You should be doing that anyway," he muttered, and to my alarm, strode boldly toward the chest.

I caught his arm. "What are you doing?"

He looked down at my hand, then up at my face. And then he just stood there, staring at me, until I let him go. The balls on this kid.

"I'm going to ensure it is properly closed," he told me. "Assuming I have your permission..."

I threw up my hands. "Have at it, Orlaton. Knock yourself out."

But I watched him warily, ready to call up Lucky should he be needed. Orlaton wasn't a magickal being. He was simply an ordinary kid with an obsession with the occult. Frankly, it was amazing that Orlaton had been allowed to know as much as he did. Had someone vouched for him to the Oddsmakers? I made a mental note to dig up information about who his parents were.

Today he wore another cardigan—navy blue this time—and a yellow bowtie with black dots. Combined with his pale, fine hair that under certain lightning made him appear to be balding, Orlaton looked like a high schooler playing his dad in the school play. But appearances were deceiving in this case. Despite his age, Orlaton was no child.

He stopped about four paces from the trunk and carefully tipped the bookshelves upright again. He must have tried to bury the trunk with

the closest thing at hand. An act of panic, probably, which didn't do my nerves any favors.

He made some motions with his fingers while he murmured words I didn't understand. I knew zilch when it came to the occult arts. Too many formulas and rules, too much studying and paying attention to detail. I was a bit ADD when it came to magickal constructions. Probably in Orlaton's eyes that made me an unsophisticated pleb.

"Somewhere around here should be a bottle of blessed water," he said without turning to look at me.

I found the bottle buried beneath the piles of books. It was about the size and shape of a container of cough syrup. It was stoppered with cork and appeared to be half full. Or was that half empty?

Cautiously, I approached with the bottle held out at arm's length. "Right behind you."

He didn't turn, just held his hand out like a surgeon in the middle of an operation. I noticed with dismay that his hand trembled. I placed the bottle carefully in his palm. The cork came out with a cheerful sounding *pop* but that was where the cheer ended. When Orlaton flung the contents of the bottle over the chest, the thing wailed.

Several voices twined together to create the sound, like a chorus of tenors. But these were glee clubbers from Hell.

"You will regret this..."

"We'll tear you apart!"

"Kill him! Kill them all!"

I "heard" the wailing threats not through my ears but in my chest. I actually clapped my hands over my breastbone as though I could stop the reedy vibration of my heart. It was a whirl like a dentist's drill boring through my rib cage. I twisted with discomfort as Orlaton splashed the trunk with more of the blessed water, inciting a fresh round of wailing and threats.

"To Hell with you!"

"You will weep and you will bleed..."

"You will suffer worse than any have suffered!"

Their voices and their threats were a million times worse than those uttered by the cursed cameos in my shop. These were malicious. These wanted to hurt Orlaton in ungodly ways.

"S-Stop," I chattered. The voices were rising in pitch, creating a fine vibration that threatened to reduce my skeleton to powder. I clenched my teeth together. They rattled dangerously and I was afraid I'd jar my fillings loose.

Orlaton, white-faced, ignored me and my suffering. He emptied out all of the water, tossed the empty bottle, and then swiftly kneeled and began yanking the loose chains around the chest so they crisscrossed the lid. The trunk twitched. I thought I saw the lid begin to crack open, thought I saw the light glinting off the tips of needle sharp fingernails. I pointed wordlessly at that widening seam of darkness and what was coming out of it, unable to voice my horror. Orlaton worked faster, perhaps having seen what I had. I saw his hands begin to shake more violently. A bead of sweat slid down the side of his face.

Just as I took my first step backward, he lashed the chains tightly over the lid and snapped it shut. Three padlocks later, the awful chorus of wails stopped vibrating within my body.

"What the hell was that?" I demanded breathlessly as I massaged my chest. "It sounded like, well, I don't know what it sounded like. It was horrible!"

"Pray you never hear its voice with your ears," he murmured, and visibly shuddered.

"I heard more than one voice."

He ran a hand down his face. "Yes."

"Dammit, Orlaton, throw me a bone!"

He rose to his feet and by his hesitation I could tell he considered kicking the trunk. The fact that he thought better of it told me volumes. He hugged himself as he faced me, a picture of fragility. But steel was in his voice as he said, "I don't owe you anything, Miss Moody. Why are you trespassing on my property? You don't have an appointment."

"Be glad I forced my way in, Orlaton! What if I hadn't roused you? That thing was starting to open."

He waved off my irritation. "I would have recovered and locked the trunk eventually."

"Or you would have continued sitting in a stupor while whatever's inside that thing ate the place!"

"It wouldn't have—" He sighed impatiently, like he was dealing with a recalcitrant two year-old. "Why are you here?"

I mentally shook off the episode with the trunk. *One nightmare at a time.* "I need to talk to you. I need your opinion."

"Mmm," was all he said before he abruptly turned on his heel and strode down an aisle and out of view.

I wasn't about to be left behind in this spooky place. I followed him, ignoring the sigh of annoyance he emitted when he noticed me. There seriously had to be thousands of books here, and each was unique. I ran my fingers across brown leather, red leather, books bound in burlap and other rough cloth, bindings that were made of pressed leaves or bark, books covered in fur and hair and spikes and thorns. They could be as thick as four inches or as thin as a comic book. Some reeked of herbs or smoke and some appeared to be wet or oily. Some—

"Ow!" I wagged my finger before holding it up to the light. I saw tiny teeth marks in my skin. "One of these books just bit me!"

Orlaton glanced back, though his disinterest couldn't have been more obvious. "Did it draw blood?"

"No."

"Then congratulations. You're not infected."

"Infected?" I glared at Orlaton's back as he continued down the aisle, perhaps a bit more cheerfully than before. "A warning would have been nice, you know."

"So would keeping your hands to yourself."

Grumbling and tucking my hands beneath my arms, I continued following him. The labyrinth seemed to go on forever and Orlaton showed no signs of stopping. Irritated and stressed, I breached the reason I had come.

"Did you know my uncle? Uncle James?"

"Tomes has been in operation for just over three years, Miss Moody."

"Wow, so your parents gave this to you to run when you were only fourteen?"

The sigh he heaved sounded like it weighed as much as an elephant.

"I made my request at that time, yes, and they wisely saw the value in acceding to my wishes."

Are your parents afraid of you? I longed to ask, but I knew that wouldn't get me on his good side. Also, the answer might alarm me.

"Uncle James was running Moonlight then," I said. "So that means you probably met him at some point."

"I met him. We interacted very little. A handful of occasions to inform me of book purchases which he believed would interest me."

Disappointment made my shoulders heavy. "Then he never shared with you anything concerning what he was up to when he wasn't running Moonlight?"

"No."

I wasn't especially surprised. It was a long shot that Uncle James would have told Orlaton anything. Why would he share important information with a teenager?

"He did visit me once for a reason other than to sell me something."

I perked. "Yeah, why?"

Orlaton glanced back at me from over one shoulder. "He wished to purchase a magicked journal. One that would translate whatever he wrote into poems by Emily Dickinson."

My jaw dropped so low a June bug could have landed comfortably on my tongue. "I have that journal. He gave it to me the day before he disappeared."

"You enjoy Emily Dickinson?"

"She's alright. I just thought it was sweet that he'd copied her poems by hand for me. That was the real value in it for me." But maybe there was much more value to be gleaned from that journal. My heart began to pound. "How do I translate the poems back into text?"

"A blood wash will do it. One part blood to twenty parts water."

Gross, but I'd slice a vein if it would tell me where he'd gone or what might have happened to him.

We finally exited the bookshelves and entered what looked like it might be a lab. Or a kitchen. With all those bottles full of bits and pieces of who knew what it could have been a laboratory as easily as it could have been where Orlaton prepared his meals. Rectangular windows sheeted with white cloth shades allowed plenty of natural light inside. A long stainless steel table, disconcertingly ridged (was it an autopsy table?) stood in the middle of the small room. Atop it sat six bowls of varying sizes, each holding something soft, wet, and lumpy, like porridge. Except this porridge was different shades of pink.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply for a moment, willing my gag reflex back under control.

"What. The hell. Is. That?" I demanded from between clenched teeth.

"A recipe for a conjuring which doesn't concern you."

I cracked my eyes open but I fixed them on Orlaton rather than on his creepy oatmeal. "Is it for conjuring something bad?"

Something in my voice caught his attention. He'd been about to dip a pipette into the bowl nearest to him but instead he turned to regard me steadily, the way a teacher does when he's trying to determine if you actually know the answer or simply made a lucky guess.

"It's for fertility," he said quietly. "Hence, why I don't share the details with anyone who asks. It's a private matter for a client."

The muscles in my neck slowly unclenched. "That's good. It's just—I had a pretty rough night. I guess I'm a little skittish. A little... squeamish." Orlaton was only seventeen, but suddenly I felt that he was older and would understand. "I saw someone destroyed in the most awful of ways."

He didn't turn pale and his mouth didn't thin, but his eyes ticked quickly to the windows and back. "The Oddsmakers?"

I nodded. "It was a lesson."

"It sounds as though it was a memorable one."

"It wasn't meant for me. Well, not entirely. But I-I didn't come here to talk about that. I need to know how people feel about me and my family. I get that they don't like dragon familiars in general, but I'm talking about disliking us personally. My mom and my uncle."

"They're both gone."

"Yes," I said with passion, "but why? Dearborn killed my parents for my mother's bones. But what of Uncle James? Are there people—shifters or other beings—that hated or feared him? Enough to get rid of him?"

A sigh that would have filled the sails of a clipper ship. "Miss Moody—"

"Can you *please* just call me Anne?"

He startled. I'd sort of yelled at him and I regretted it, but I was strung out. Hearing that other magickal beings believed that my relatives were henchmen for the Oddsmakers, and seeing with my own eyes what

the Oddsmakers were capable of, had filled me with fury and frustration. No way had my family, at any time, willingly supported the horrors that the Oddsmakers were capable of committing. If other people believed that, I needed to know so I could spread the truth.

Orlaton stared hard at me, perhaps torn between wanting to tell me to get the hell out and humoring me by calling me by my first name. He avoided both.

"For many years there have been rumors about your family." He dropped his gaze to the pink stuff in the bowls. "I thought you knew. This is...awkward."

"So's being attacked by a bunch of shifters." I stabbed a hand through my hair and cursed beneath my breath. "How long? Since before I was born?"

He nodded. "It began with your mother."

My laugh was mirthless. "So all this time—the people I've dealt with—they've all believed I'm in cahoots with the Oddsmakers? Like I'm their muscle or something?"

"Not everyone believes this, of course. But there is a significant, notable faction that does."

"Among the shifters."

"They make up a large part, yes."

"And you?"

I already knew his answer, but I wanted to see what Orlaton looked like when he was genuinely offended. It would make me feel better to see proof that I had an ally.

But Orlaton wouldn't look at me.

"I see you as my neighbor, Miss Moody. You have yet to prove yourself a threat to me. If that changes, I will...reassess."

I could only stare. "Then you believe I work for them. You believe I've done things."

He frowned and threw the pipette on the table so hard it shattered the implement. It shocked us both. Orlaton's lips were white as he said to me, "The truth is, I believe one day you'll be pushed to do something horrible. It's my goal to not be anywhere near you when this occurs."

I was crushed. Goofy, nerdy Orlaton believed I was a bad guy. I'd stuck up for him with my friends, but all along he'd not harbored the same faith in me.

"Wow," I murmured. My face felt hot. Suddenly Tomes was too small and claustrophobic. I needed air.

"Miss Moody—"

"I have to go."

He lifted his arm, like maybe he was going to reach for me and offer some lame comfort, but I wasn't sticking around to find out. I spun on my heel and strode quickly back through the bookstore.

"You can't isolate yourself!" he called after me, his voice dogging me like a poltergeist. "You need allies, Miss Moody."

"I thought I had some," I snarled to myself.

"Miss Moo—Anne—don't become what they fear!"

But it was too late. I already was.

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Once I was back in Moonlight, I headed straight through the bead curtain that separated my living space from the shop floor. The walls of my bathroom streamed blood and more dripped from the ceiling until I blinked my eyes hard to clear the curse. The mirror above the sink showed the reflection of a short, pale man who'd eaten his own lips. Disgusting.

These were curses I was familiar with, though, so they barely registered as I took my toothbrush out of the cup it sat in and filled the cup with water. I pricked my finger with a needle and streamed several drops of my blood into the cup of water. I didn't have a paint brush so I grabbed a cotton eye makeup remover pad.

In my bedroom I reached beneath the bed and pulled out the Tupperware storage container that held the few personal items I owned as well as winter sweaters and scarves. Beneath the Santa Clause outfit that I wore each year at the annual Santa Run, I found the journal full of Emily Dickinson poems that I thought my uncle had painstakingly copied out for me. It was even more valuable to me now that I knew what it actually was.

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I dipped the pad into the blood wash and carefully brushed it down the first page of the journal, over the inscription that read, *To my favorite niece. Stay fierce and stay smart!* I liked that Uncle James had always referred to me as his 'smart niece' rather than his 'beautiful niece' when introducing me to people. It was a

little thing, but it had shown me from a young age what was most important to him.

I set the cotton pad aside and waited, but nothing happened except that I'd made the page all soggy. I blotted the sheet dry with a corner of my bed sheet and turned to the first page of poems, which featured one of my favorites, *It Sounded as if the Streets Were Running*. As soon as I made the first pass with the pad, the letters on the page magickally rearranged to create new words. Excitedly I swiped the pad over the entire sheet and once all the letters had settled, began to read what was revealed to me.

But though I'd expected a secret missive, I was let down. The first page was a description of dragon familiars and ways that they could be used by a sorcerer or sorceress. It was elementary information that he had taught me when I was very young, with only a couple of tips that were new, though hardly game changers.

I washed the second page with the makeup pad and waited impatiently as the poem on the page dissolved and new words appeared.

This page featured descriptions of magickal beings, their physical attributes and magickal abilities and/or powers. It was a guide of sorts which I ran through cursorily, noting with interest that gargoyles weren't listed, either because Uncle James didn't know anything about them or hadn't anticipated that I would ever run into the apparently rare creatures.

The next washed page revealed a list of businesses in Las Vegas that Uncle James vouched for. I recognized about six of them as being run by magickal beings and figured this must be a community-friendly listing in case I needed to do business in-house, so to speak. Some he'd marked with asterisks, but with no explanation as to why. The Keyhole was one such entry. So was the art gallery across the street.

Finally, the next page proved to be something other than static information or an educational guide. Uncle James wrote directly to me:

*Anne, it is imperative that you know that a terrible danger is looming over the world and there is a good chance that it may originate here in Las Vegas. The power that we're all drawn to is exactly what's drawing the insects, and these insects seek to commit terrible deeds.*

That was more like it. I scooted back until my back rested against the headboard and I drew my knees up to my chest, resting the journal

against it. It was a flimsy defense against supernatural prying eyes, but it was the best I could do. I dropped my eyes back to the page and continued reading.

*Your mother and father agreed to wage war against these insects. I never told you because your father asked me not to. He knew you well, Anne. Even at four years old. He knew the fire that would be ignited in your blood if you learned how they had lived their lives. He wanted to protect you and I do, too.*

*But I think it's time to allow you to make your own decisions.*

I shook my head, sick with the knowledge that this journal had been sitting beneath my bed for two years. Two years! I prayed nothing that I read would prove to be time sensitive.

*Your mother was a magnificent dragon sorceress. Our family's blood comes from the ancient dragons, but in the womb the power went to your mother. I'd always accused her of being a greedy twin and this proved it. I am a dragon sorcerer, too, even though I've told you I am a warlock. I'm sorry for the deception, but for a long time now it has been dangerous to be descended from dragons. Though I haven't been concerned for my own safety, I've been concerned for yours. A house of two dragons, even if one is as weak as I, would attract attention. But I'd hoped that a lone, young sorceress who was discreet with her power, would not.*

"Yeah, I blew that one, Uncle James," I said bitterly.

Still, I was amazed to learn that he had been a dragon sorcerer. Really, there wasn't a reason I should have suspected it. He had never used his power that I remembered. He'd simply told me that he was a warlock.

*I'm not powerful, but your mother could do great things. This is why the beings known as the Oddsmakers called upon her to perform various tasks for them.*

And there it was. Kleure's accusations were the truth. I took a deep breath to quell the rising emotion in me. I didn't want to be angry with my



parents or ashamed of them. It took willpower to continue reading when I feared what I would learn.

*Neither your mother nor your father would tell me what they did for the Oddsmakers and on their behalf. But I do know this: whatever she did, it kept your mother awake at night. It prompted her to ask me to watch over you should anything ever happen to the two of them. Yes, parents of young children have been known to plan ahead in this way, but I sensed urgency in your mother's request. To me, it felt as though she were planning for the inevitable, not for the worst case scenario. It made me question the nature of her tasks for the Oddsmakers.*

*Opening that Pandora's box may be the last thing I do.*

That was the end of the page. My heart began to pound as I turned to the next poem in the book. Using the wet pad, I washed down the sheet as I had before. Another sheet of my uncle's writing appeared for me to read.

*When you were a year old, something arrived in Las Vegas.*

A chill rippled across my skin. It was as though the air conditioning had kicked on full blast.

*There were rumors of what it could be. They were only that: rumors. No one had seen it in daylight. No one had seen it by streetlight. No one knew if it was a shapeshifter or if it was a monster. It was too quick to be identified. Too smart to be caught. Clever and wicked, was how people described it.*

*Dangerous, was what I thought.*

I let out a long, low breath, telling myself to calm down. It occurred to me then that the wards were down and the shop door was unlocked. I saved my spot in the journal and jumped out of bed. Out in the yard, I reset the wards around the property. Instantly I felt better, although guilt weighed on my shoulders as I returned to the shop and locked the front door.

Back in my bed once more, I picked up the journal with hands that trembled. I sensed that everything that I knew of the world was about to change in the next few minutes.

*Your mother admitted to me that she had been ordered to hunt down this newcomer for the Oddsmakers. I wasn't to tell anyone. It was a secret mission. I thought it was a strange one. Why didn't the Oddsmakers seize the creature themselves? We all knew they possessed the power to do so, so why send your mother?*

*The mystery was never solved to my satisfaction. One day, four months after the sightings of this creature were first reported, your mother informed me that it had left Las Vegas, never to return. I was relieved that she hadn't been hurt.*

*But, Anne, I am convinced that your mother lied to me that night.*

*I only wish I knew what she had been lying about.*

Had Uncle James believed she had lied about the creature leaving Vegas? Or had he meant he believed that my mother had, in fact, destroyed the creature and not simply run it out of town?

My thoughts turned naturally to the creature that had attacked Diana. Were they one and the same? It made sense. Revenge could no longer be sought against my mom, but it could be found through me.

I read on.

*Iris kept many secrets from me. I'm convinced she was forced to use her sorcery in ways she was afraid to tell me. She wanted to protect me. She wanted to protect you most of all. But perhaps there is danger in this ignorance. I'm beginning to think that this is the case.*

*She and your father were killed by a dark entity, though the story you've been told is that their deaths were an accident. You were only four and impressionable. I believed that telling you the truth would only make you grow hard and bitter and determined to seek revenge. However, now, as I am on the verge of meeting with the Oddsmakers for the first time, I have to question whether I have the right to stop you from doing what you want.*

*Iris was your mother. Jacob was your father. They were taken from you. Maybe you should be allowed to take in return.*

Nothing more was written in the journal. I closed it, unsure if Uncle James had meant that final line to galvanize me into seeking revenge. Even if he hadn't, that was where my heart was aimed. The problem was I didn't have a target.

I'd already eliminated Dearborn. Vagasso was next, but I didn't know how to find him and he seemed similar to a bear or a tarantula in that you didn't go after them on their own turf. I had to wait for Vagasso to expose himself and then strike.

But what about that creature that the Oddsmakers had ordered my mom to hunt down? Its description sounded suspiciously like the creature that had attacked Diana. I needed Vale to come home. I had the feeling he might have the answers to questions I didn't know I needed to ask.

First, though, I needed to grill a certain small Voodoo doll.

## Chapter 6

When I entered Celestina's shop, I saw that the curtains were drawn around the alcove where her reading table sat. This indicated that she was with a client, a fact confirmed by the small sign hanging from the curtain rail which directed me to have a seat and be patient.

Patience wasn't possible at that point. I walked to the middle of the room and looked up at the hanging Voodoo dolls. The Diana-doll waved one small arm at me.

"How's it going?" I whispered so as not to interfere with Celestina's reading.

"I'm inside a doll made of cotton balls and burlap. What do you think, Anne, dear?"

I didn't envy whoever ended up marrying Christian and gained Diana as a mother-in-law.

"I don't know how these things work," I said, motioning at the doll. "Is there anything we can do to make you feel more comfortable?"

"Do you have a Barbie townhouse available for rental?"

"Ha ha, sorry. Just sold my last one." I *was* tempted to move her into a haunted doll house. As soon as I could find one. Magickal items were often listed in the missed connections section of Craigslist. You just had to know how to separate the hook-up ads from the magickal insider ads. "Listen, I was wondering if you could go over a few things with me about your attack."

The doll swung back and forth on its fishing line. "I told you everything I know. It was too dark to see much."

"Right. I understand, and maybe you won't be able to tell me anything more, but...did you get an impression of the size of the creature that attacked you?"

"It wasn't larger than an elephant. It wasn't smaller than a rabbit. It was dark."

I nodded understandingly even though I wanted to swat the doll out of the air like a volleyball. "Maybe narrow it down a bit to, I don't know, between a dog and a lion?"

The doll continued swinging. "Alright."

"Did you hear the sound of claws or did it have hooves, do you think?"

"I don't—I suppose I recall hearing a clicking noise."

"Good, good!" This was like pulling teeth but we were making progress. "What about air pressure? Was the air still or did you ever feel a breeze?"

"I couldn't tell if it had wings," Diana-doll snapped at me. "I would have said as much. I—"

She cut herself off quickly, but I'd caught it. "You, what?"

The Voodoo doll stopped swinging. Though its button eyes couldn't convey emotion, I nonetheless sensed that the doll was annoyed.

"Nothing. I was wrong, so it's irrelevant to consider."

"Diana, please. Just tell me. Any little thing can help."

For several seconds the doll said nothing and didn't move. I began to wonder if Diana's consciousness had finally succeeding in leaving the doll. Then:

"When it first appeared, I thought it was Vale, because it spoke to me with its mind."

"I thought so, too," I admitted to her.

"But it wasn't him," she said firmly.

Her certainty made me feel better, but I didn't like being so ignorant. Why didn't I know more monster lore? I definitely needed to read through Uncle James' guide and memorize everything he'd written. 'Know thy enemy' was sounding like a pretty good idea.

"What other creatures have the ability to speak telepathically?" I asked her, hoping the list wasn't too long.

"That's the problem, dear." The doll sighed. "I don't know of any besides gargoyles."

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I opened the shop because I'd hoped that servicing customers might clear my head and allow me to think about the situation rationally rather

than emotionally.

It seemed unlikely that Vale had been the one to attack Diana. She knew him reasonably well. She would have recognized him, shadows or no. Plus, the creature had been asking questions about me and Vale. Sure, that could have been a ruse to steer suspicion away from him, but why torture Diana for info he didn't need? Nothing about Vale had hinted that he could be cruel in any way. That didn't seem like something you could hide, especially from a girlfriend.

No, I was positive it wasn't his gargoyle, but it was something around the same size, with claws. That left a lot of options.

With my chin propped on my hand on the counter, I watched the two teenaged boys who hovered around the section that held monster hunter paraphernalia. The items there weren't really meant for use in hunting monsters—I'd be run out of town for encouraging such an activity—but it was how I called that section of the shop in my head. The shelves there held weapons of all sorts, from wooden knives to sharpened katanas, to curved scimitars and small crossbows that fired silver arrows. My favorite was a shield the size of a pizza, covered with silver eagle heads whose beaks would come alive and snap the hell out of whatever came in contact with them.

One of the boys reached for it and immediately yelped and jerked his hand back.

"It's protected by blood wards," I told them.

Startled, they both jumped back from the shelves.

"What are blood wards?" the younger boy asked.

"Duh, you need to spill blood before the ward lets you through," his friend told him after punching the younger boy in the shoulder. "Then the weapon is keyed to you."

"That whole section is warded," I warned them. "So you can look, but I don't suggest you touch. Not until you're ready to commit blood and buy."

"Why can't we test them out?" the older boy asked, scowling slightly.

"Test them out how?" I replied, bored. "Two of those blades leak poison. The arrows will melt once they penetrate skin. That axe on the wall will inject barbed metal thorns into your palm that won't release you

until you've named and killed a victim. Which one did you want to try out?"

The boys didn't linger long after that.

I thought about them, and tried to guess what kinds of magickal beings they'd been. Shifters? Probably. But either or both of them could have been warlocks or sorcerers. Or something rare like a water fey or one of a dozen entities whose powers hadn't been fully cataloged by the people who liked to do such things. The truth was, the magickal community was wildly diverse, which was great if you were trying repopulate the Earth but not so great if you were trying to pinpoint a poorly described creature.

Sunset came quickly, thank goodness, and fortunately, so did Vale.

And he was such a jerk. He brought roses.

"Who are those for?" I demanded. I surged up off the stool as though he'd walked in carrying a loaded shotgun.

He smirked. "Who do you think?"

He looked good. Too good, like he was intending to use his hotness as a weapon against me.

"You go off to find Diana's body and you come back looking like that?" I accused, waving at his black sport coat over a black button down and dark jeans. His wavy hair fell in a sexy tousle over his eyes. He'd brushed it that way deliberately; I was sure of it. Just so I'd want to brush it back with my fingers.

"I found her body and it's fine. Two minor bruises on her upper arms, like someone had grabbed her there, but otherwise her physical form is unharmed. I already visited her at Celestina's and told her it was safe to go back." He stopped on the other side of the counter. The smell of the roses began to fill the shop like a cloud of gargoyle pheromone. "I thought we'd celebrate."

I eyed him mistrustfully. "Celebrate what?"

"The fact that we're all okay? Isn't that enough?"

"Well, sure, but it's just weird. Unexpected, I mean."

The hand not holding the roses came up to rub the back of his neck. "Seeing her body that way, empty like a corpse, hit me in a particular way. It made me think of you."

"You thought of me in association with something mindless?"

"Moody..." he said with a strange, quiet chuckle. His gaze dropped to the roses and held there. "You're not making this easy."

I finally got it then: he was flustered.

He'd been worried about me.

"Oh," I said, like an idiot. Fair enough. I was one. "That's...sweet, Vale. I—wow, I really like that."

I felt myself blushing and it was a good feeling. It proved to me that I wasn't cynical and jaded, that something as simple as someone caring about me could still make me feel happy. I always tried so hard to be strong...it was nice to be soft for a change.

He looked up from beneath his fringe, part bashful, part hopeful, part *I'm getting in your pants with this look, aren't I?* Vale knew what he was doing.

I didn't mind it, though. Who wouldn't want to be seduced by someone with those eyes? Vale didn't strip your clothes off with a look; he laid you bare, inside and out.

"I thought if you were interested, we'd swing by my place so you could take a look at where I live. Learn a little more about me." He turned to look back at the shop. A Goth man was at the back, his back to us as he perused the shelves. He'd entered the shop about ten minutes earlier. Vale faced me again with a quirked brow. "If you manage to close up before sunrise, that is."

"As soon as the shop clears I'll close it," I told him, fighting off a fluttery feeling of anticipation. It was a girlish feeling and I liked it. I was probably in denial, pretending everything that had happened with the Oddsmakers hadn't happened, but I didn't care. "Should I get changed?" I tended to favor comfort over fashion most of the time, but I was no stranger to Sephora and I had a few cute outfits that I knew would turn Vale's head.

He brought the roses up to his face and smelled them while his gaze roamed over me, leaving my skin tingling. "I think you're beautiful as is, Moody. And what you're wearing is fine for what I have planned."

Ooh, now that had possibilities.

I propped my hands on my hips. "Are those flowers your security blanket or do you intend to actually give them to me?"

He blushed.

I nearly squealed with delight.

Then the cursed cameos, prophets of doom, chimed in:

Betrayed! Betrayed!

He's nothing but trouble!

You're a fool to trust...Anne Moody!

That's right. I'd totally forgotten. Someone was supposed to commit a betrayal.

Would it be Vale?

I held out my hands for the roses. "Gimme."

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The Goth guy took his sweet time. He must have browsed for nearly a half an hour. I was pretty sure he fondled every item I had for sale, including the zombie nutcrackers, one of which bit the guy's thumb.

Vale had settled himself behind the counter with me, leaning against the shelves like a sentinel. Or maybe he was only staring at my butt.

I was highly conscious of his presence behind me in a variety of ways, some good, some not so good. Now was the time he could hurt me. As soon as this last customer stepped out the door I could find myself with a back full of gargoyle claws. But my body was equally aware of Vale in other ways. Womanly ways. My heart remained attracted to him even though my mind screamed at me to arm myself.

I was limp with relief when Goth guy finally approached me at the counter.

He reached into his black duster and removed something from the inner pocket. Very precisely, as though he were placing a landmine, he set an amulet that looked to be formed of blood red wax on the counter. He said with all the gravity of Abraham Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg address, "This is evil."

I scrubbed my face with both hands. "Really."

Vale was utterly silent and motionless behind me, but his amusement buffeted me like the winds that periodically blasted through the valley.

"Why is it evil?" I asked. I wasn't in the mood to play along. I had somewhere to be, and hopefully with someone I wouldn't need to kill by the end of the night.

"You can't tell?" the Goth guy asked me with a shade of suspicion in his voice.

"Aura reading isn't my thing, sorry."

That didn't sit very well with the guy, who made a show of flexing all ten of his fingers where they rested on the edge of the counter as though he were struggling to maintain his patience. What was he going to do? Go Super Saiyan on me?

Now that he was near, I noticed the tattoos: a snake curved along the top of each eyebrow, like each was resting on a furry log. They weren't ordinary tattoos, though. The one above his right eyebrow was a cobra. It periodically rose up into the middle of his forehead and flared its hood at me.

I waved generally at his face. "You don't worry that someone non-magickal would notice that?"

He frowned like I'd just spoken German to him, and raised his hand to his eyebrow. He hissed and jerked his hand away when the snake tattoo struck at his finger. Two tiny beads of blood welled on his finger before he touched it to his tongue and licked it away. He lowered his hand to the countertop again. I watched him close his eyes and scrunch up his face, like he was trying to launch himself into space using the power of his mind. The snake lay down along his eyebrow, matching its sleepier twin on the other side.

He opened his eyes once more. His face went eerily still.

"This is evil," he intoned again, staring at me and then at the amulet he'd set between us.

"Yeah, I heard you the first time." Why were magickal beings such weirdos?

Just to freak him out, I carelessly picked up the amulet. An impression of a ram's head decorated one side. I'd seen one of these before, a green one. A witch made these and sold them to ordinary people at craft and art fairs as occult relics. Completely harmless and this guy should have known so.

"Look, do you want to sell it or pawn it? I'm closing up soon so I need to hurry this along."

Goth guy raised his eyes beyond my shoulder to Vale. The misbehaving cobra twitched its tail.

"This is evil," he repeated for the third time, "and so is that."

The red amulet turned into a puddle of hot wax in my palm. I yelped and tried to fling the wax off but it seized up tight around my hand

and then it began to climb up my wrist and onto my forearm, increasing in volume and encasing my arm in rigid wax.

I yelled for Vale but he was already in his gargoyle form, zooming over my shoulder straight for Goth guy—

Snakes exploded from within the guy's black duster, causing the fabric to flare back. At least a hundred of them, all black, but all different sizes and lengths, probably different varieties but I was no herpetologist. The snakes seemed to be attached to something within the duster, or hell, were attached to Goth guy himself. He held his arms out, an eerie, beatific smile on his face like he was cleansing the world by attacking us with his wriggling, fanged friends.

Vale's gargoyle dive-bombed the guy, weaving skillfully between the writhing, snapping snakes, avoiding them just as it had managed to avoid me when I was in my dragon form out in the desert.

Two of the snakes managed to strike Vale's gargoyle, sending it spinning sideways and out of reach, leathery wings flapping hard to propel it away. I prayed the snakes didn't possess actual venom, but I couldn't spend much time worrying about it. I was about to become an exhibit in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

The red wax had reached my shoulder and was beginning to spread across my collarbones and up the side of my neck. I tried smashing it with my other fist, but the wax was too thick. The wax climbed up my throat and curled over my chin.

Lucky blasted into the room like an explosion, immediately ramming into Goth guy, sending him and his snakes staggering into the nearest shelf of merchandise. I punched the wax on my neck and this time the red menace cracked. Like a self-hating Mike Tyson, I punched myself repeatedly and rotated my trapped arm until the wax began to flake off me in chunks. I had Lucky fly at Goth guy to head butt him again to make sure he wouldn't reactivate the wax.

Goth guy spun beneath Lucky's attack to sprawl across the floor, his black snake pals writhing angrily beneath him. It looked like the guy had fallen into a nest of snakes, but it was worse knowing the snakes were a part of him, or at least under his command. As Lucky reared back for another strike, Vale's gargoyle zipped in and raked its claws across the back of Goth guy's duster. The guy howled and the snakes beneath him either retracted or were absorbed into his body. In seconds, the guy lay

alone on the floor. He twisted his head back to give me a baleful look from over one shoulder.

"You deserved that and worse," I told him as I shook off the last bits of red wax. What a mess on my shop floor. I couldn't even re-melt it into a candle. Not without risking that it'd try to smother me in my sleep.

Just for a little added indignity, I had Lucky bite the back of the guy's duster and drag him to his feet. Goth guy angrily shook off the dragon once he was upright. I had to give him points for not being intimidated by a thirty-foot golden Chinese dragon that was near enough to bite his head off. But I subtracted all of those points for him being an asshole.

"Who are you?" I demanded. I heard the clicking of the gargoyle's claws as it settled on the floor on the other side of Goth guy, facing Lucky. My dragon, hovering in the air, seemed torn between watching the man in black and Vale's gargoyle. This wasn't the first time Lucky had shown a less than thrilled reaction to Vale in either form.

*Lucky has had an issue with him and his gargoyle from the beginning. You thought it was jealousy. What if it's not? What if your dragon knows what you're afraid to face? What if Lucky knows he's your enemy?*

"Who are you?" I repeated, because I'd rather face down a known baddie whom I hadn't slept with.

Goth guy calmly brushed himself down. He appeared to be in his late twenties, but with magickal beings you never really knew. Vale was a perfect example of that.

"It doesn't matter who I am," Goth guy said, finally lifting his gaze to me. His eyes were a medium shade of blue, but it was difficult to look at them when the snake tattoos above his eyebrows continued to rear and twist across his forehead as though they faced off against a mongoose. "I'm not your enemy. I was trying to keep you safe."

I stuck a finger in my ear and wiggled it. "Come again? You were about to asphyxiate me with wax."

"It wouldn't have covered your face. It was meant to keep you immobile while I dealt with *that*." Goth guy aimed an icy glare at the gargoyle.

My throat went dry. "What are you talking about?"

"You've been deceived. *He's* been tricking you. That's what they do." Goth guy shook out his coat, but snakes didn't fall out around his feet; he was simply adjusting the fit. He looked back at me again. "We know you're a dragon sorceress, but you have no idea what you're dealing with. We do. As I said, I was sent here to save you."

"Who the hell are 'we'?"

"SOS: the Society of Shapeshifters. We're an advocacy group for the protection and preservation of shifter rights."

"SOS?" I had to shake my head. "You realize that he's a shapeshifter, right? Of course you do. You freakin' saw him shift right in front of you."

Goth guy's eyes narrowed with apparent affront. "But he's *cold-blooded*."

I stared at him for a long moment. "Buddy, in case you missed it, about a hundred snakes just burst out of your coat like jazz hands and I'm pretty sure every last one of them was cold-blooded."

To my surprise, he flushed. Hell, he turned beet red. "The snakes are a spell. They're tied to my tattoos. I'm not a snake shifter. I'm a—" He mumbled something I couldn't make out.

I leaned forward. "Say again?"

His cheeks grew even brighter. "*I said I'm a hedgehog shifter, alright?!"*

I had to bite my lips and hold my breath. Once I was no longer in danger of bursting into hysterical laughter, I nodded. "I see. So the snakes are an attempt to make you look...tougher. Than a hedgehog. A cute little—I have to tell you, you have the cutest little feet and your nose—"

"Make fun all you want," he hissed, "but we won't stand for his kind. And if you protect him you'll go down, too."

Great. A zealot. Vale had mentioned these guys during the drive to Christian's house, right before I burned it to the ground during my mini-faceoff against Vagasso.

"So you're one of the purists." I crossed my arms, even more annoyed than when I'd been scraping wax off my body. "Vale's not cold-blooded. That's a big mix-up with some gargoyles back in Europe that are actually demons. You saw him a minute ago. Tall, dark, and handsome? Definitely not a cold-blooded demon."

"You're compromised," Goth guy stated.

"And you're insulting me," I shot back, "for making me sound like I'm some sort of idiot."

Goth guy pressed his lips together. The snakes above his eyebrows rippled but slowly lay down again, though they looked twitchy. "You don't know what he's capable of," he said quietly.

It was one of the few things he could have said to make me think twice. As if he sensed that things were going south for him, Vale shifted back into his human form. He didn't appear to care that he was stark naked in front of Goth guy, whose only reaction to his transformation was to curl his hands as though he wished he could strangle Vale.

"I know the SOS," Vale said. If there hadn't been venom in the snakes' bites, there was plenty of it in his voice. "I don't know you."

"My name is Gareth. I just arrived from California. They called me to deal with you."

"I thought I taught the SOS to leave me alone." Vale took a step toward the other man, his nakedness doing nothing to diminish the danger radiating off him. "You dare attack me in my friend's shop? You attack *her*?"

"I waited, hoping you would go outside. I couldn't wait any longer." Gareth didn't move, though the snakes on his forehead were wild again. I thought I saw movement beneath his black duster, too.

"Vale," I warned.

He didn't take his eyes off Gareth. "I saw. It doesn't matter how many snakes he has." His smile was a predator's. "I'm going to kill him no matter what."

"Wait!" I cried out. "This guy's from California. Don't you think that's a strange coincidence?"

If Vale had gone ahead and killed Gareth at that point, it would have sealed the deal for me that Vale was behind the attack on Diana and was trying to cover it up. But to my relief, my comment gave him pause.

"It was no coincidence," Gareth confirmed, oddly defiant. His attitude reminded me of Kleure's, which sent a shiver of revulsion through me. "I saw what you did to that woman."

I sucked in my breath. "You saw—"

"What?" Vale said softly, leaning ominously over Gareth. "What do you think you saw?"

"I saw your gargoyle, and nothing you can say or do will change that."

## Chapter 7

I locked up the shop and turned off the Open sign. The wards were up so nothing could come in and bother us while we interrogated Gareth. Lucky took a form that was as thin as rope and twenty feet long. He wrapped around Gareth, binding him in the haunted rocking chair while Vale and I took turns pacing in front of the guy.

"What did you see?" Vale demanded quietly, menacingly. He'd pulled his clothes back on but left the jacket off and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. I think he was trying to show Gareth that he was ready to begin waterboarding him or whatever, but I just appreciated the reveal of strong forearms and broad shoulders.

"I saw you," Gareth shot back triumphantly. He acted as though his announcement had struck a nerve. "Your gargoyle broke into that woman's apartment through the kitchen window. You were waiting for her when she came home."

"Why didn't you warn her?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I wanted to see what he would do to her."

"Remind me not to ask you to watch my back," I muttered.

"My orders were specific: find Vale in whatever form he was in and apprehend him."

"Not kill me?" Vale asked softly.

Gareth tried to act tough but I caught the way he shivered. "I was just supposed to immobilize you."

"Because you think he's cold-blooded. That is the stupidest reason ever."

"That's not the only reason," he shot at me. "It's because his kind are in league with demons. He paves the way for their invasion. When the city is covered with gargoyles, tell me how you'll know the difference? You won't be able to!"

"That's a problem for *my* species to deal with," Vale said, his face as stony as his statue form. "I don't recall the gargoyles asking for your



help."

"If you can't handle your own, then it's up to someone else to do it!"

Vale took a step toward him but I jumped between them. "Let's go back and focus on the gargoyle you saw breaking into that apartment. You're one hundred percent certain that it was a gargoyle? It couldn't have been anything else?"

Gareth shook out his shoulders. "I know what I saw. I'd swear to it in a court of law."

"Handy if what you were planning to do was legal," Vale muttered with a glare.

I gave him a look and he spun away, arms crossed. I squatted in front of Gareth. "This is more important than you realize. Tell us everything you know about that gargoyle and what it did that night."

Gareth sneered. Even his snake tattoos wiggled insultingly. "Why should I?"

I heard Vale turn on his heel as if he were about to leap back into the fray, but I beat him to the punch. "Because if you don't cooperate," I said softly, smiling at Gareth, "I'm going to let my dragon bite all your limbs off before he burns you to a crisp."

I let him see in my eyes that I was serious—at least about the part about Lucky biting some part of him; I wouldn't kill anyone except in self-defense. What Gareth saw in my eyes was enough for him to take me seriously.

"I saw it clearly in the moonlight," he began, darting a nervous look at Vale, who remained behind me. "It had been waiting in the trees for the woman to come home. I know because I had been following it for over four hours, trying to corner it."

"How did you know about it?" I asked.

"The SOS is worldwide. We have a network of watchers. We've been following this gargoyle since it was first spotted in Vancouver a couple of months ago. It reappeared every few days in a different state. We thought it was a new gargoyle, until it showed up in Las Vegas. That's when we realized it was Vale."

I kept my expression neutral, but I was bothered by what Gareth had said. Either the gargoyle they'd been tracking *had* been Vale, or his brother had stopped in Vegas and neither of us had been the wiser.

"Go on," I told Gareth.

"I didn't become involved until it showed up in California. That's when I was sent to track it."

"You found it in a tree."

"That's right. While the woman was parking her car, it climbed out of the tree and inside her apartment. I don't know what happened once she entered. I heard her scream once and that was it. About two minutes later, the gargoyle crawled out of the window and flew away."

"You didn't think about helping that woman?" Vale growled.

Gareth glared at him. "I was parked a block away, watching everything with binoculars. By the time I arrived at the apartment, you—excuse me, the *mysterious gargoyle*—was in the process of leaving. I had to follow it. I couldn't keep up, but I knew where it was heading."

I stood up and took a step back from both of them. I didn't know what to think.

"Moody."

Vale's deep voice, the one I found so sexy, sent a shiver of trepidation through me. He was watching me with those dark eyes, probably reading every thought that ran through my head. He motioned for me to join him in the studio. For the first time, I was nervous about being alone with him.

And I hated myself for it. How shallow were my feelings for him if I could doubt him the first time a stranger accused of him of wrongdoing? Angry with myself, I led the way through the bead curtain and into my bedroom.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Vale said at once, crowding me against the edge of my bed.

Rather than push him away, I sat on the mattress and looked up at him calmly. "I believe he followed a gargoyle here. I don't believe it's you."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he released his breath. "Thank you."

"Is it someone you know?"

It was my turn to hold my breath. I knew what answer I expected. If he didn't give it to me...we might have problems.

I watched him turn to gaze sightlessly out the back window. "I think it's Xaran. I think it's my brother." He glanced at me almost

anxiously. "I'm sorry I didn't say something sooner."

"No, it's alright," I said, relieved. "You have no idea how glad I am that you admitted it might be him. I had some suspicions, but I don't know your brother or your relationship to him. I didn't want to assume anything."

"As soon as I heard Diana's story I had my suspicions, too, Moody. I needed to go there and see for myself."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing in her apartment, but Gareth was right. Xaran had been waiting for her in a tree. He left a mark in the bark there, something he carves when he's bored."

"Why is he threatening people to learn about you?" I laughed uneasily. "I know you don't own a phone, but surely gargoyles have other ways to communicate with each other? Especially royalty—"

"Being an heir means nothing," he said tensely. I'd touched a sore spot. Why did it hurt? Vale began to pace the studio. "When I left Europe I left all that behind. Xaran knew that. He agreed to let me go while he dealt with the demon king on his own. He'd said he was fine with it."

"He's doing reconnaissance," I suggested, "trying to learn who you're hanging out with and whether he can trust me."

"He agreed to let me go."

"Vale," I said, rising to my feet and coming up behind him. "Why is this a big deal? What's going on with your family's throne?"

"I told you that a demon sits on the throne. That's not problem enough? Xaran obviously needs my help overthrowing it."

But there was something in his voice that didn't ring true to me. I couldn't put my finger on it, and that bothered me a lot. Distrusting your boyfriend wasn't supposed to happen without a reason, and yet I didn't fully trust him on this and I didn't know why.

"We need to contact him," I declared. "He can't keep going around threatening the people who know you. And with this SOS group out there, that's just asking for an ugly confrontation."

"I can get rid of them," he said darkly as he turned to face me. The light was at his back, but I could still see the grim cast of his features.

"Scare him, don't hurt him." I let him know by my tone that I wouldn't condone anything else. "I've had enough of violence lately."

He cocked his head. "What happened while I was away?"

"It doesn't matter right now," I said as casually as I could. "I just don't want you to give the SOS or anyone else another reason to fear you. We need fewer enemies, not more. Once they're gone, we'll deal with your brother."

Vale rested a hand on my shoulder. I knew him well enough by now to tell that something was on his mind, something that might not have anything to do with Xaran or the SOS. Something that might be personal between us and explain why he'd shown up with roses.

When the silence stretched, I prodded him. "Go scare him off, Vale, so you can take me to your place like you promised."

He gently squeezed my arm. "Stay here."

I remained in the dark while he went back into the shop to deal with Gareth. The masculine murmurs of their voices remained steady, even though I'd half-expected Gareth to resist at least vocally. But I heard nothing of strife between them and when, about ten minutes later, the bead curtain parted and Vale stepped into the studio, I knew that Gareth had been taken care of, whatever that meant.

"Close the shop and we'll go?" Vale asked hopefully.

I searched his face for signs that the confrontation with Gareth hadn't gone pleasantly. But Vale was a handsome cipher. In the end, all I could do was say, "Let's go."

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We took a ride sharing service to the Naked City. It certainly wasn't my first choice for a date, that was for sure.

The neighborhood behind the Statosphere tower, known colloquially as the Naked City, was a sketchy one. Some considered it one of the most dangerous in the city, though as a magickal being my opinion on that was skewed. Dangerous to me was eight miles beneath Area 51, where the Oddsmakers were.

But for most people this was an area you avoided at all costs unless you had no choice. It was rife with gang activity. For some reason this was where Vale lived. I couldn't disguise my confusion as the car let us out on a street stretching within the shadow of the city's most iconic landmark.

"Why here?" I asked, keeping my voice low as we walked across a weed-filled yard up to a battered old house with graffiti-covered walls and

plywood nailed over its windows. "You didn't bring me out here to knock me off, did you?"

"I realize it's not the most romantic of locations," he said wryly as he unlocked the deadbolt on the front door, "but it's where I spend my time when I don't spend it with you."

"Not in Summerlin?" I asked, pretending to be disappointed.

"I only told Zach that so he wouldn't try to stalk me."

Sadness prick me at the mention of my dead friend. "Good call. He totally would have."

Inside it was bare, practically empty. The carpet was worn but seemed clean and the kitchen wasn't crawling with roaches (probably because it didn't look like anyone had ever cooked anything in there). There were clothes in the closet of the sole bedroom, but no bed. After my quick, depressing tour, I returned to the living room where Vale waited.

"You're such a liar," I said. "You don't live here. Not really."

He broke into a grin. "I was waiting for you to dump me when you saw this place."

"I wouldn't have dumped you, but I would have seriously reassessed my options. So where *do* you live?"

"I actually do crash here on occasion. When my first choice isn't available."

"Your first choice?"

He held out his hand. "I'll show you after we eat. For practical reasons."

He held my hand as we walked out of the neighborhood and up to the Strip. North Las Vegas Boulevard was pretty sketchy, too, and I nervously eyed some shady characters. But Vale walked with purpose and he must have radiated danger because no one bothered us. Hell, no one looked our way twice.

To my surprise, Vale took us inside the Stratosphere. At just over eleven hundred feet high, it was the tallest freestanding observation tower in the U.S., according to my handsome tour guide. He led me to an elevator which we rode seemingly forever, finally ending up on the 106th floor.

"Oh, my gosh," I breathed as we stepped out and I saw the sign for Top of the World. "I've always wanted to eat up here."

"I'm glad I'm the first to bring you," Vale murmured.

"I wish I'd worn something nicer!"

His lips brushed my ear. "I told you before. I think you're beautiful as you are."

It was easy to forget everything that had happened today and curl my arms around his waist and kiss him. Easy to pretend that my greatest concern was whether I'd get the surf and turf and whether I'd let Vale drink champagne directly from my lips at the end of the night.

We ate dinner and we laughed. We admired the beautiful view of the city and we admired each other. Everything that had happened to me lately felt like they'd happened to someone else, like I'd watched a horror movie that I wouldn't have to watch again and could forget.

"You know, you never included ex-girlfriends in your list of potential enemies," I teased during dessert. "I'd think that any woman who dated you would fight tooth and nail to keep you if you treated them like this."

He smiled and stirred his coffee. "My last girlfriend was born before your mother was born. This isn't something I do on a regular basis."

I did my best to hide how thrilled I was. "What was she?" My smile wavered. "Is she still alive?"

"She was a non-magickal." His eyes seemed darker. "She died a long time ago. Before she should have."

I was suddenly sorry I'd asked.

He curled his hands around the cup. "She was killed during an attack on me."

"The SOS?"

"No, it was a predator aiming to take out an heir to the Gargoyle Throne. The attack was inevitable and I should have—" He shook it off. "For a long time I hated myself for bringing a non-magickal into my life. She didn't deserve what I did to her. She would have lived a long, happy life had she not met me."

"You didn't do anything but love her," I insisted. "It's not your fault someone else killed her."

"It's been a long time, and I've mostly accepted that. But I came away from it vowing never to love another woman who couldn't defend herself." He reached across the table and took my hand. "Your power drew me in, Moody, I admit that. But for as important as that is for me, it's you,

regular Anne Moody, who makes me want to take you to dinners like this every night."

"I honestly don't know why you think I'm anyone special. Without my dragon, I'm not that great."

"With your dragon or without it, you're more than who you see when you look in the mirror. If I were ever in danger, you would—and I quote, "fight tooth and nail"—to save me. Even as a guy who likes to believe I'll be the one doing the saving, that's an incredible turn-on. You, Anne Moody, turn me on like no woman ever has."

Feminine power had never felt so good. I shivered. He saw and didn't smile smugly. Rather, his chest rose with a deep breath, and he murmured, "We need to get out of here before I do something that will get us thrown out."

Vale paid the check with cash. I didn't know where he got his money from but I didn't bother to ask. This was a dream and I didn't want to wake from it, not yet.

"Can we go to the observation tower?" I asked once we'd exited the restaurant. "It's the next floor up."

"Another time. I've got other plans for you."

Of course, that filled my head with all sorts of images and all of them were better than a view of Las Vegas. We rode the elevator back down to the casino level and went outside. It was a bit of a mood killer returning to that rough neighborhood after the magical night we'd had. I was toying with the idea of suggesting we simply get a room at the Stratosphere. As if reading my mind, Vale drew us up short beside a retaining wall that separated the casino property from the residential area.

"You want to know more about me," he said as he faced me, taking my hands. "I understand. So I'm going to teach you something about me. About gargoyles." He grinned boyishly and released my hands. To my shock, he shrugged out of his jacket, folded it, and set it on the ground near the wall. Then he began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Is this a gargoyle strip tease?" I asked, glancing around to make sure we didn't have an audience.

"Something like that."

He had the shirt open. Shrugged it off. Next, he worked on his jeans.

"So this idea you had that would have had us thrown out of the restaurant," I said with a nervous chuckle, "that didn't have anything to do with public sex, did it? Because I might be down with that, but not in an alley where I'm afraid I'll be knifed or urinated on."

He grinned. "No, Moody."

I pretended to wipe sweat from my forehead. "Whew. So what are you showing me besides how hot you are?"

"The thing about gargoyles is that we crave altitude. The higher the better. It's something we can't control. Like an impulse."

I raised my eyes to the Stratosphere, towering over us like a giant white needle. "That's why you live right next to the tallest building in the city?"

"Exactly. But that's not enough for me." He toed off his shoes and then removed the last of his clothing. I took a long look because that's not a sight I was ever going to grow tired of. He held out his hand. "You'll have to trust me."

He was smiling, but I wondered if the question held deeper significance.

"I do," I said. It was true until something changed.

He transformed into his gargoyle form. *We're going for a ride. Whatever you do, don't scream.*

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I didn't scream, but only because my heart was blocking all sound from escaping my throat. While logically I knew that gargoyles must be able to fly at incredible speeds in order for Vale to make it to California and back before sunrise, I hadn't honestly appreciated just how fast that was. I shut my eyes and whimpered as Vale's gargoyle launched us from the ground into the sky, zooming alongside the white spine of the Stratosphere. The wind rushed by so quickly it sounded like a tornado in my ears.

Abruptly we slowed, and my stomach somersaulted unpleasantly. Slightly nauseous, I opened my eyes and immediately wished I hadn't. Vale's gargoyle held me by my arms while hovering just underneath the Top of the World restaurant where we'd just eaten. We were eight hundred feet up and tucked within the shadows of the support beams there.



"Oh, my god," I groaned when I made the poor decision to look down.

*No, keep your eyes on me, Moody.*

The gargoyle flew us to a small platform that was supported by the branching legs of the tower, just beneath the disc of the restaurant. Though the platform was the approximate size of a large Jacuzzi, I couldn't help feeling like I was balanced on something the size of a dinner plate. Vale's gargoyle settled almost delicately near the edge, like a pigeon, though I'd never make that comparison aloud. It blinked at me with its topaz eyes, something on its face signaling approval.

*This is where you'll find me most nights.*

I forced myself to calm down. The platform was flat and stable. It would take deliberate effort to slide off it and I wasn't about to make any effort. I craned my neck back and checked out the underside of the restaurant, watching how the apparatus slowly rotated. Distantly, from the other side of the tower, I heard the occasional scream of a tourist jumping off the roof in the controlled descent ride, which was like bungee jumping for the less adventurous.

Stretching out in front of me was the entire Las Vegas valley. It was gorgeous, like a platter full of jewels lit from within. The lights seemed even brighter and more colorful without a sheet of glass separating me from the view as had been the case during dinner.

"It's beautiful," I told Vale's gargoyle. "I can see the appeal."

*I can't help myself from coming up here.* He sounded slightly sheepish. *I guess we're all subjected to the pull of our blood. We're victims to it, in a way.*

I pictured his gargoyle in Paris, perched on rooftops, and I smiled. I found it endearing that it had substituted the Stratosphere for the Notre Dame cathedral.

"There's no chance anyone will spot you up here?" I asked his gargoyle. "People have zoom lenses. And what about maintenance workers and window washers?"

*I only come up here after dark. During the day, when I'm in my statue form, I usually use the home I showed you.*

"That's why there wasn't any furniture. You don't need any when you're a statue."

*Bingo. I created a small space beneath the carpet and floorboards in the bedroom. Even if someone breaks in, they'll never find me.*

I studied the gargoyle. "But you said 'usually'. Do you sometimes stay up here after sunrise?"

The gargoyle flicked its tail and fluttered its wings. I had learned that these were tells when it was uncomfortable.

*I don't stay up here, no. I'd be unable to defend myself in my stone form. If I'm not in my home...I'm at yours.*

I blinked. "What do you mean at mine? You always leave before the sky lightens."

*I leave your bed, yes. But I don't go far. I like being close to you.* The gargoyle huffed and snapped its whip-like tail almost angrily. *I sit in your backyard, near the air conditioning unit.*

I pictured it, his statue sitting there all alone like a garden gnome. I grinned like a buffoon.

"You're clingy!" I was delighted. "That's so adorable, Vale. Melanie's going to flip out."

*Don't you dare tell her, Moody! I mean it. I'll leave you up here!*

"I might need a bribe to keep silent," I purred. Oh, how I wished Vale were in his human form right then. I would have tackled him and kissed him until he fainted.

The gargoyle flared its wings. I thought I saw its topaz eyes flash, though I knew it couldn't be from anger.

*Didn't anyone ever warn you not to taunt a gargoyle? We're vicious, sneaky monsters.*

He was joking, but it was a splash of cold water on my ardor.

"Yeah, I've heard that quite a lot recently," I admitted grimly.

*You know I would never hurt you. Or anyone who didn't deserve it.*

"That leaves the door open for some judgment calls, though, don't you think?"

*If someone or a creature attacks those who are close to me, I will retaliate, Moody. I won't apologize for that. Just like Gareth tonight. He's lucky he got off easy.*

"That's fair. It's just cruelty I'm having a lot of problems with. But that doesn't apply to you." I smiled at the gargoyle, a bit wistfully. "You and I are a real pair, huh? No one wants to invite us to their parties. We're too scary."

*We don't need them. We only need each other.*

"Who knew sneaky gargoyles could be so romantic," I murmured. I gazed out at the city again. Normally, I could've gotten lost in the view, spending hours admiring the lights against the craggy shadows of the mountains around us. But I'd had my fill. "Take me down now, please. I want to be with Vale the man."

*I won't ever complain about hearing--*

I saw the dark form in the corner of my eye half a second before I felt claws curl around my arms and yank me off the platform. I screamed instinctually, thinking I had been knocked off. But whatever had me didn't release me; it was carrying me. I heard another scream, somewhat distant: it was one of the jumpers on the other side. Hopefully my own scream would be attributed to just another thrill-seeker.

I looked above my outstretched arms. A gargoyle beat its wings furiously above me. It was slightly larger than Vale's gargoyle, but was otherwise similar in build and coloring with the exception of a long, jagged scar that ran diagonally across its face, just missing eyes that were the exact same shade of topaz as Vale's.

"Xaran!" I gasped.

It startled the gargoyle, prompting it to look down at me. When Vale's gargoyle barreled hard into it the two gargoyles went spinning—  
—and I dropped like a stone.

I was too terrified to scream again. My lungs were rising up beneath my collarbones. My only chance was Lucky, even though I knew that potentially hundreds of people below and farther down the Strip would see him. But what choice did I have? Die to keep my secret? I wasn't that noble...

Before I could call him out I was snatched up in firm claws again.

*No dragon! They'll see.*

"Vale," I choked out in relief. I tipped my head back to look up at my familiar, beloved gargoyle. "Let me down. Please!"

I shut my eyes as his gargoyle raced through the air at top speed again so nobody would be able to make out what we were.

When the toes of my shoes dragged on asphalt again, Vale's gargoyle released me. I staggered up against the retaining wall, clinging to it with my fingertips like Spider-Man. I didn't have a fear of heights, but another experience like that and I'd think seriously about changing my

stance. I gasped for breath and willed my heart rate to go down. Behind me, I heard Vale's gargoyle launch itself into the air again.

I craned my neck back to watch the blur of the aerial battle between the two gargoyles. I doubted any non-magickal, seeing them, would have understood what they were. From this distance they resembled fighting bats.

Knowing the truth, I clutched my hands to my chest, shocked that two brothers could fight each other like this. The two dark figures moved too swiftly for me to tell who was winning or if either of them was hurt. Surely as brothers they wouldn't draw blood?

Then again, I knew pretty much nothing about Vale's relationship with Xaran. They might very well be enemies. Maybe Xaran resented Vale for not joining him in overthrowing the demon who sat on the Gargoyle Throne. Maybe Vale was territorial, and would treat Xaran like he would any other interloper on his turf. I wished that Uncle James had included gargoyles in the guide he'd written for me. I could have used some information about the species.

*I can't even call up Orlaton for help. The kid doesn't trust me.*

That was a punch to the gut, a reminder that my date with Vale tonight hadn't changed a fundamental truth: the magickal community of Las Vegas believed I was the champion of the Oddsmakers, and the Oddsmakers themselves were horrible beings. As I watched the gargoyles race after each other, collide, break apart, and resume the cycle, I had to question whether what was going on up there had something to do with me. What if Xaran believed, like Kleure, that I was a danger?

I kept an eye on the streets, but none of the passersby looked up. Or if they did, it was only briefly, to admire the Stratosphere itself or on the occasions when another jumper took a brave leap and was vocal about it. I crossed my fingers that the situation was the same inside the restaurant where the diners had a closer view of the gargoyles. Hopefully the rotation of the restaurant made it difficult for them to get a good look.

The fight lasted for nearly five minutes before I saw one dark figure race west. I had no way of knowing who had been left behind, so I waited tensely as the remaining gargoyle zoomed to where I stood against the wall. Even when it landed heavily, it took me a few panicked seconds to notice the lack of scar on the gargoyle's face.

"Vale, thank god," I breathed.

Questions bubbled inside me as Vale transformed.

"That was your brother!"

He nodded grimly and began yanking his clothes on. "I nearly killed him for grabbing you like that."

"Why did he do that?" I pushed my hair back out of my face. I felt like I'd been dangling beneath a 747. "Was he trying to hurt me?"

Vale grimaced. "He wants to meet with you. He won't take no for an answer."

I straightened. "That's fine. I want to meet that jerk, too!"

Vale just shook his head. He was sweating and his hair was a riot of dark waves. He was more than a little fierce, and it was a good reminder that for as sweet and romantic as he'd been, he was still an ancient creature that had survived numerous attacks throughout his life. "I told him to meet us at my place. But if you don't feel comfortable there, he'll know where to find us."

"It has to be Moonlight," I said. That he didn't argue told me that he'd anticipated my answer. "Your bossy brother is going to meet me on *my* turf."

Vale glanced at the sky again. "I'm not sure it'll make any difference."

## Chapter 8

Someone was waiting for us at Moonlight.

When I saw the silhouette, I told the car service driver to drop us off a half a block away. Vale tried to lead the way but I grabbed his hand and pulled him back so we approached together.

Had it been darker, I might have mistaken the man on the sidewalk for Vale. But there was enough starlight for me to see that this man was slightly broader across the shoulders and thicker in the waist. He wasn't quite a bruiser type, but he looked like he wouldn't shy from a physical confrontation. When I drew close enough to see his face, I was torn: he shared Vale's somber, dark-eyed look, the one that had hooked me when I'd seen Vale through the magick mirror. But Xaran differed from his brother in two significant ways: where Vale always seemed thoughtful and brooding, like a man wrestling with important decisions, Xaran appeared to be a man who had already made up his mind and was willing to fight to defend those opinions. He also shared the pale scar on his face that had adorned his gargoyle form. It was a battle scar or I'd eat my shoe.

"Don't say a word until we're inside, Xaran," Vale warned as soon as we were within earshot of him.

The other man nodded his head easily, as though he hadn't just been fighting his brother with tooth and claw, as if he'd simply come over for a chat.

Unnerved by the unpredictability of Xaran, I hurriedly entered the yard and lowered the wards. I snapped the lights on in the shop, though I kept the Open sign turned off and locked the door once both men were inside with me. Then I thought better of it. I reset the yard wards. No point leaving us open for someone to sneak up on us.

"No interruptions this way," I said as I regarded the two men who seemed to take up eighty percent of the breathing space within Moonlight.

I remained by the door while Xaran drifted toward the shelves. Vale stood midway between us, not quite blocking his brother's view of me

but clearly ready to leap between us.

"What are you doing here?" Vale demanded. There was an edge to his voice I'd never heard from him before. Being without a brother or sister, I didn't fully appreciate all the nuances that could exist in a sibling relationship, but I was beginning to realize there were numerous strong undercurrents running between these two.

Xaran crossed his arms in a pose Vale had used often before. Xaran was dressed in a brown leather jacket with jeans and heavy leather boots. He looked like he'd just ridden up on a Harley. His hair was longer than Vale's, pulled back into a short ponytail at his nape with tendrils framing his strong face. I supposed he was sexy in a bad boy biker kind of way, but that just spelled trouble in my book. The bad boy biker might make your girlfriends sigh with lust, but he wasn't going to be there when you needed someone to help you carry three dozen cupcakes to a book club meeting.

Not that I ever baked cupcakes or attended book clubs, but I could tell that Xaran was one of those untamed magickal beings that were better admired from afar.

"You know why I'm here, Vale." Xaran's voice sounded like it came from a crack in the earth. It was as deep as magma. "You're overdue, so I thought I'd come by and see if you needed assistance."

Vale's hands curled into fists. He shot me a quick look that made me stand a little taller. Had that been guilt on his face?

"What's he overdue for?" I asked warily.

"Moody..." Vale growled, throwing me a look of consternation.

"You really think I'd just stand here and be quiet like a good little girl?"

Under other circumstances I would have found his sigh and the way he closed his eyes to be sort of cute. But once again, it appeared that my boyfriend had been playing fast and loose with the truth.

He ran a hand over his face, something he usually did when he was frustrated or trying to buy time. Probably both applied at the moment. "Xaran, she doesn't know. Any of it. The time was never right."

"How long have you been here?" Xaran demanded. He pointed at me. "You think this situation is going to get better on its own?"

"Listen, buddy, you point that finger at me again and my dragon will bite it off," I said to him.

Xaran gave me a head to toe look. It was as offensive as a once-over given by any guy on the Strip. "She's just like I thought she'd be. We'd better get this right or we'll be in trouble."

That was it. I was tired of being referred to as though I wasn't there. I pulled up Lucky in his weaker form, just so his bulk and his brightness filled the shop and caused Xaran's smug smile to fall off his face. He staggered backward into the nearest shelf.

"What the hell?!"

Vale just shook his head. "Moody will kick your ass if you keep talking about her that way."

I feigned innocence. "Who, me? I'm sweet. But Lucky? Yeah, he'll take a bite out of your big, bad self." I banished Lucky in an instant, just so the transition would be more dramatic. "It sounds like you two boys have a lot to tell me. I want to hear all of it. And it better be the truth."

Frustratingly, that didn't spur either of them to speak first. They just continued glaring at each other.

"Is headbutting next?" I asked.

"You shouldn't be here," Vale said to Xaran. "You should never have left Europe."

"I'm here because time is running short and apparently you lack a sense of urgency. Are you mad? Playing around with this dragon—"

"Be careful what you say next," I murmured.

Xaran glared at me a moment before switching his attention back to his brother. "I heard something about a demon summoning. What makes you think that wouldn't draw me here?"

"If I'd needed help with Vagasso I would have asked for it," Vale shot back.

At the mention of Vagasso I swallowed with dread. "How do you know what happened with Vagasso?" I asked Xaran.

"Because there are a lot of ears in this town, dragon. And they come to me when they hear something juicy. You may have stopped Vagasso, but all you've done is convinced him to try for something more dramatic. That's how dark spirits seem to work."

"You sound like you know a lot about him. Why is that? And why don't *you* know more about Vagasso?" I shot at Vale.

"Because he's stuck his head in the sand, pretending things aren't about to unfold the way we all know they will," Xaran growled, as much as



at Vale as at the situation. "He doesn't know anything, but he should. You both should." He advanced on Vale again. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"What were *you* thinking showing up here where anyone can see you?"

Vale was ready to punch his brother. I wasn't in the mood to see them fighting; they might wreck the shop.

"Enough with the sword fighting," I snapped. "Just say it: why are you here? Oh, and let's not forget you stopping off first in California to terrorize a poor woman!"

Xaran scoffed at the accusation. "I didn't terrorize her. I'd barely begun questioning her when she fainted and wouldn't wake up. What could I do then? I left."

"Why question her in the first place?" Vale countered. "You knew that was Christian's mother."

"Because I wanted to know what you've been up to all this time. Or make that, what you *haven't* been up to. If she'd told me you were doing what you were supposed to, I would have returned to France and you wouldn't have been the wiser. Instead, I had to come here and see for myself that this place is about to go up in flames." Xaran pointed obnoxiously at me. "And I'm not talking about your dragon."

I seriously had to restrain myself from having Lucky bite off that finger. "So the first thing you do is attack me and nearly kill me?"

Xaran shrugged like it was a minor detail. "I wanted your attention and I wanted to see what the situation was like between you two." He gave a pointed look at Vale. "I got my answer."

"Yeah, he's my boytoy, so what?" I ignored Vale's grunt of annoyance. "You've got my attention. It's the wrong sort of attention but I'm getting the feeling you don't know the difference. Are you responsible for the curse that's been on my shop lately?"

Xaran didn't quite smile but the twitch of his lips was damning enough. "I wanted to see how you'd react, see if you're just a little girl or someone we can use."

It was my turn to point. "You're a real asshole."

"I'm not a delicate flower, no. I'm what I need to be. I'm hoping you're what *you* need to be."

His vagaries were getting on my nerves, but I had to break this down one point at a time. "Tell me about Vagasso and this new plan you say he has."

Xaran began a casual exploration of the shop, running a thick finger along the edges of the shelves as he spoke. "Vagasso is no longer interested in taking over this city with demons. It was a difficult plan to begin with and you two seemed to have driven that point home for him. As you know, I didn't get all the details so I'm merely making assumptions here." He had the gall to smirk at us, like he was a misbehaving little boy who'd tried to tickle the information out of Diana. I was wrong about him and Vale. They were nothing alike.

"His new plan makes far more sense because it takes advantage of a weakness that's existed here for decades."

I saw Vale go pale. "You're not talking about the Rift."

Xaran snorted indelicately. "Of course I'm talking about the Rift. It makes perfect sense. The first experiment didn't work. Now it's time for Plan B. We thought it would happen later. It's happening now. That means your timetable was just shortened significantly." He had reached the monster hunting section and I waited tensely for him to grab one of the weapons there and attack us with it. "You need to do your job, little brother. I'm not leaving until you do."

"What is he supposed to do?" I asked, narrow-eyed.

Xaran's smile was a quick slice across his face. "Get on your good side." He dusted his hands as though everything he'd touched had left a residue. "So maybe it'd be best that I leave him to it." He abruptly turned and headed for the front door.

"You're leaving just like that?" Incredulous, I looked between him and Vale. "There's more to this!"

"There is." Xaran unlocked the door and opened it. "But I'll leave that to your boytoy to tell you all about it. I just stopped by to light a fire under the two of you."

Chuckling, he let himself out of the shop. The wards buzzed as he moved through them. He wouldn't be able to come back through them, but at that point my focus was on Vale.

"Your brother is a piece of work. I'm glad he lives in Europe. He should stay there."

Vale smiled without mirth. "I'm sure he'd rather be there. He's got enough to handle without coming here and borrowing more trouble."

"What's the Rift that you mentioned? You looked horrified by the idea of it."

Vale looked slightly ill. "It's called the Western Infernus Rift. It runs beneath the Las Vegas valley. Non-magickals call it the Las Vegas Shear Zone. They think it's a fault line. It's more than that. It's an opening to Hell."

My head fell back on my shoulders. Of course Vagasso would be interested in the gateway to Hell. He was a mega-baddie. Going big was their M.O. It was how you gained access to the Super Villains Club.

"Why aren't people falling into it or demons spilling out of it?" I asked as I pictured a crack the size of the Grand Canyon, vomiting up a sea of orcs. "Is it guarded by someone? *Something*?"

"A passive defense exists: nine seals that keep it locked shut. That, however, is the problem. Vagasso must think he has a play on the seals, a way to break them or neutralize them. I'm not sure. I'm as clueless as you are."

"Except that you're not," I pointed out. "From what your brother said, you've known about Vagasso for a while. In fact, it almost sounds like you originally came here to fight him."

It would make more sense, actually. A lot of coincidences had lined up that I was beginning to doubt.

"Moody..." Vale walked up to me and cupped my shoulders. "I came here for you. That was my mission originally. But before I could tell you anything, I made a mistake: I stopped first to visit a friend, someone who was trying to keep tabs on Vagasso."

I thought hard. "You don't have any friends except mine." I cocked my head. "Christian?"

"Yes, I'd had no idea that he was moving against Vagasso. It was purely bad timing."

"Moving against Vagasso? But the way he described what happened with the demon possession made it sound like you getting cursed was a big mistake. An accident. Before then, he'd never had contact with Vagasso."

"Only one part of what happened was an accident, Moody. Diana sabotaging the demon summoning ritual and trying to send it into an inert object was a very deliberate act." Vale rubbed my arms. "He and Diana

have been following Vagasso ever since he killed Christian's father in Antarctica."

I blinked. "I thought he was accidentally killed by fishermen in Alaska."

"Christian said that because at the time he didn't know how much he could tell you. I'm telling you the truth now: the two of them have vowed to hunt down Vagasso and punish him for murdering Christian's father. When they learned he was in Vegas, they came, too. Diana infiltrated his group so she could stop whatever he was planning."

That made more sense than Christian choosing Vegas just because it was remote. He was a water fey. This should be, and probably was, his last choice of cities to live in.

"Diana's not a superhero, she's a spy," I said, impressed even more by her.

"Christian's father had been guarding a powerful relic that was buried beneath the ice in Antarctica. Vagasso killed him and stole it. That was why Diana knew exactly how to modify Vagasso's ritual so the demon would be under her temporary control. She was familiar with the relic because of her husband. Once the demon was under her control, she tried to cast it into the mirror in the hall, which Christian would have immediately smashed with a mallet. But then I walked in and you know how that ended up."

I was amazed. What I thought had been a comedy of errors had been planned up until Vale's untimely entrance.

"You said you originally came here for me," I reminded him. "Why? I had nothing to do with Vagasso at that time. I didn't even know he existed."

Vale turned his head, looking out the front windows of Moonlight. "Will you go somewhere with me? It'll help explain things better than I could."

Though I wanted him to spell it all out, right then and there, I couldn't help being intrigued. And maybe a part of me was testing Vale, wanting to see if he would try to snow me again by distracting me with something instead of telling me the truth.

"Alright. Color me curious," I told him.

He searched my eyes and whatever he saw there made him smile sadly. "You don't trust me, but I'll do my best to change that."

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I expected a trip across the city, but Vale only walked me across the street. To the art gallery which sat beside Tomes. The same gallery which my uncle had marked with an asterisk in his guide of friendly magickal businesses.

"Someone lost a hand in there," I told Vale as we reached the sidewalk in front of the place.

"I did hear about the incident with the hand," he told me. "I think we'll be okay."

Unlike most of the businesses in this neighborhood, the gallery no longer resembled the house it had once been. The original structure had been demolished and a square, squat building constructed in its place. Its clean, sharp, geometric lines made it stand out amidst the aging, sagging houses surrounding it. There were no windows that I could see, making the building more reminiscent of a small museum. Its yard had been replaced with poured concrete.

Vale led the way to the tall, burgundy front door. "Just make sure not to touch anything," he teased.

He pushed in the door without knocking and motioned for me to precede him inside. I entered cautiously and immediately felt the buzz of magick as I crossed the threshold. Some kind of ward, apparently. Did it prevent non-magickals from entering or was there another demographic denied entrance?

"While we're admiring art," I whispered to Vale, "what's your brother going to be up to?"

"He'll hole up somewhere. I won't be surprised if I find him on the Stratosphere. It will draw him just as it draws me."

"He'll just hang out? He's come all this way, crossed an ocean and the entire U.S., just to admire the view of the city?"

"He'll be watching," Vale muttered, and there were multiple layers in that response that I was dying to peel back.

The room we'd entered was ivory. Ivory walls, ivory marble tiles, an ivory ceiling studded with a dozen or more pot lights, and two long ivory leather benches. The only art in the room consisted of four plaster casts set in the wall weirdly at waist level. One was the face of the Sphinx,

another was a half bust of Julius Caesar. The third cast was of Medusa and the fourth was a bearded guy that, if pressed, I'd guess was Blackbeard the pirate.

"Greetings."

I startled at the voice and spun around to find a small being standing beside me. The top of his white-haired head came to my hip. He smiled a rather gnarly smile at me from within the sea of soft, puffy wrinkles that made his face sag like a peeled apple that had sat on the counter for too long. It was a pretty typical look for a goblin.

"Welcome to Gallery Veritatis. I am the proprietor, Echinacious."

He was dressed in a three-piece coffee brown suit with a burnt orange tie. I liked his leather, curly-toed boots. Melanie would've been all over them.

Vale introduced us and added, "Anne runs Moonlight Pawn."

Echinacious tapped the side of his droopy, crooked nose. His face made me think that parts of it were slowly sliding off. In twenty years he might be only a pair of eyeballs.

"Good neighbor discount, eh?" he said with a soft, friendly chuckle.

"We're paying full price," Vale told him. "We're interested in two pieces."

"Shifter portraits?" Echinacious looked us both over. "I think only one of you is a shifter, and even then, I wouldn't bet any money on it."

"So you paint portraits?" I motioned at the blank room. "Why aren't there any on display?"

"Because they're not meant for casual viewing, Anne. For some, the act of transformation can be very intimate. It's a vulnerable moment. However, I do have some examples for you to enjoy if you'd like."

I nodded and watched the goblin touch the nose of the Sphinx cast. A panel along the opposite wall slid aside, much like the one that had allowed admittance to the Keyhole. This panel hid a room that was much smaller, maybe ten by ten. It was as dark as the main room of the gallery was light. Inside, two portraits sat on metal easels. Each was illuminated by its own spotlight.

Echinacious didn't need to explain a thing. I murmured in awe as I approached the two paintings. They were magickal: two distinctly different images appearing on each canvas, much like lenticular photos that you tilted in order to see a second image. These portraits, however,

shifted on their own, no need for tilting. The one on the left was a portrait of a plain-looking middle-aged woman, smiling kindly. Her eyes were green with a brown spot touching the pupil of the left eye. As I watched, the image dissolved and coalesced into the image of a long-haired cat with eyes that were identical to the woman's.

In the painting on the right, a pair of toddlers, siblings by the look of them, grinned widely at us. They then shifted into a pair of fluffy lop-eared bunnies. It was all I could do not to coo with delight.

"If I was a shifter, I think I would love one of these," I admitted.

"They're quite popular," Echinacious said proudly. "Family portraits are in particular demand, as well as the opposite spectrum: slow-motion, full transformations. Those are exceedingly intimate and very powerful to watch."

"It almost sounds erotic," I said with an apologetic smile at the goblin.

He only chuckled. "Often that is the reasoning behind requests for them. They are the shapeshifter version of a boudoir photo."

"We're not here for a shifter portrait," Vale reminded me quietly, though the low burr of his voice made me want to own a portrait of *him*. To Echinacious, he said, "I'd like two memory stains, using my memory and Anne's sorcery to power them."

"Power them?" I questioned as Echinacious led us back to the main gallery.

"Memory stains are only available to witches and warlocks, sorcerers and sorceresses. I had not realized you were a sorceress, Anne."

Here we go. "I'm descended from dragons."

The goblin only shrugged. "All this time I had no idea such power existed across the street from me. I would have felt so much safer had I known."

His nonchalant attitude threw me for a loop.

"Most people react negatively when they learn my familiar is a dragon," I told him with disbelief.

Echinacious rolled his beady little eyes. "What could you do to me? Make me short? Make me ugly? Too late for either of those things, I'm afraid."

"I could end your life," I said softly, feeling Vale grow tense beside me.

The goblin waved a stubby hand carelessly. "It takes a lot to bury a goblin, Anne. We're a tough species. I've heard us referred to as the cockroaches of the magickal community. That isn't an unfair comparison, actually." He glanced back at me and winked. "I'm not afraid of you. To me, you're just another potential customer."

I wanted to hug the little guy. It was a shame I hadn't known how awesome he was before now. I would have sent him all the business I could. I'd definitely be sending Celestina and Lev over here. They were the perfect candidates for a shifter portrait since Lev loved being a wolf so much. This way Celestina could refer to the portrait when she forgot what her boyfriend looked like in his human form.

Echinacious touched the nose of the cast that I thought of as Blackbeard. The new room that the goblin led us into was as dark as the shifter portrait room had been. This time, though, the metal easel in the center of the room held a blank canvas that was encased in an ornate, gold-gilded frame. Standing before the easel was what appeared to me to be one of those garden gazing balls on a stand. It was iridescent, leaning toward blues and purples, and seemed to emit a subtle glow.

"Here is where we transfer a memory of your choosing to the canvas," Echinacious explained. "The memory can be of anything, but the stain will consist of only a single scene. One second in time, so please make certain to concentrate only on that particular second so as to ensure you stain the correct one."

I turned to Vale, confused. "Why do we need this?"

"Because I want you to see two memories of mine. They're important to what we're doing."

Since I had no idea what we were doing in the first place, I let myself be guided to stand beside Vale in front of the gazing ball thing.

"Place one hand on the focus, please."

Assuming the focus was the ball, I set my palm on it. It was surprisingly warm, like a mug of tea. Vale's pinky finger rested alongside mine.

Echinacious said from the side of the room, "Vale, please concentrate on the memory you wish to stain. One second only, please. Anne, I need you to will your sorcery into the ball. Since you are a dragon sorceress, that doesn't mean bring up your familiar. Send only your sorcery."

Send only my sorcery. That wasn't something I ever did. I used Lucky for everything. But I understood what the goblin was asking me to do.

I considered the rumble in my chest where my awareness of Lucky existed. He didn't actually live behind my breastbone, of course, but that was where my magickal core was. I pulled from there now, but gently, like I was reaching into a barrel of cotton candy and trying to extract just a few strands of the wispy material without crushing or melting it. I didn't envision Lucky's form in any way. That kept my sorcery amorphous, a mere cloud of energy. I could feel it transferring through my fingertips and into the ball that Echinacious had called the focus.

"Please be sure not to remove your hands from the focus," the goblin added, almost as an afterthought. Maybe he'd forgotten once, which led to the infamous story of someone losing their hand here.

Beside me, Vale closed his eyes. I allowed my gaze to float over his features, trying to find a reason not to trust him and push him away. He'd been by my side through the worst of it, and it sounded like he intended to be there when it became hairy once again. But what if his secrecy was increasing the danger for both of us? And why wouldn't he just come out and tell me what he and Xaran wanted me to do?

"It's beginning," Echinacious said in a hushed voice.

On the canvas, colors began to appear like they'd been dropped there from the tip of a brush. Gradually, they blended together to assume shapes. It was like watching a watercolor being painted by an invisible brush, images appearing as if magickally. My smile formed without conscious thought. I was in awe of what was occurring on the canvas. This was coming from Vale? With a boost from me? Together we could create beautiful art?

Seconds rushed past with more color appearing on the canvas, combining and separating, growing darker around the edges and then darker within the center of the image, too. In fact, it was becoming clear that this memory was one which had occurred at night, which made sense since that was when Vale was conscious. When I saw the storm clouds forming and then two beams of light shooting up into the sky, I realized what scene he had chosen to recall.

It was the night my parents were run off the road. I could make out their car, a crumpled silver Honda at the base of a vertiginous cliff, its

front end pointing up at the sky with the headlights illuminating the clouds. There was a dark mass over the bulk of the car, sort of like a fog, but blurrier. It made it impossible for me to make out any details of what sat behind it. Vale had told me something had veiled his vision of the accident, so this was all he had been able to see that night. Though I was disappointed that I couldn't see inside the car, I was awestruck by what I could see.

A golden dragon reared above that concealing blur. It was as magnificent as Lucky, a real bearded Chinese dragon, with fins flared for maximum intimidation. I searched the canvas eagerly, hoping to see my mother, but I couldn't find her. She must have still been in the wreckage and concealed from view. She and my father. This memory showed how she had tried to protect them both despite whatever injuries she had suffered from the crash. She had been a warrior to the end.

My eyes burned with tears of pride and sorrow. I wish I could have told her how awesome I thought she was. I wish I could have seen her dragon in the flesh, just once.

"It is complete." Echinacious stepped up to the canvas to admire it. "A significant moment, I believe."

It was an understatement and a half. There in a gilded frame sat a precious second before my parents were murdered.

Vale turned to me, his dark eyes like bottomless wells of empathy. "I wanted you to see what I saw that night. I wanted you to know what she was like."

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice ragged. I wiped at the moisture on my face and then repeated, "Thank you." I threw my arms around his shoulders.

He held me against him and rubbed my back. He might have a problem with keeping too many secrets, but I would forgive him a lot for having done this. Only someone who truly cared would have bothered. Only someone who loved me.

"Your mother was magnificent, Moody, and so are you. I need you to believe that. I need you to *understand* that. Vagasso was afraid of your mother and he's afraid of you, too. You and Lucky are a force to be reckoned with."

I didn't care about being a "force to be reckoned with" but it was apparent that Vale wanted me to believe that. He had an agenda here, but I

didn't resent him for it. I wanted to know what it was.

I pulled away from him and dashed away the last of my tears. "What other memory did you want me to see?"

Echinacious removed the completed memory and set it carefully against a wall. He then placed another blank, framed canvas on the easel.

"This is another memory I carry of your mother." Vale's brow creased, as though he wasn't as sure about the value or rightness of showing me this particular scene. "It will surprise you, but it is the truth as I saw it."

"You've got me worried," I quipped weakly.

"It will be alright." Vale's dark eyes compelled me to trust him.

We placed our hands side by side on the focus again. I pulled my sorcery and fed it through my fingertips. As colors began to appear on the canvas, my palms grew moist. Why did Vale think this would affect me? Was it a bad memory? Would it make me grow angry with my mother, or worse, disappointed?

This time it took a lot longer for me to identify what I saw. I didn't recognize the setting, for one thing. It appeared to be indoors, for I could see walls covered with green striped wallpaper. I didn't know of any place with walls like that. Shapes began to emerge that materialized into animals: cats, dogs, a mountain lion and a pair of wolves. They were shifters, but there were people there as well in human form. All in all, it appeared to be a gathering of a couple dozen shifters in various forms of transformation, much like Melanie and I had encountered in the Keyhole. But this wasn't the Keyhole and there was another significant difference. The focus of this memory was a woman.

A woman who looked just like my mom.

She was smiling and shaking the hand of a man who looked like Kleure in his human form. Kleure was grinning his dog grin, and he looked genuinely happy. They both did, as though they were meeting for the first time.

"This was the night your mother agreed to join forces with Kleure," Vale said quietly. "Their plan was to overthrow the Oddsmakers."

Chapter 9

As I stood there in stunned silence, I heard Vale ask Echinacious, "This room is protected, yes?"

"The wards are impenetrable by anyone. Even them."

Them being the Oddsmakers, the magickal bosses who ruled over the city and over all of us. The powerful forces that had the ability to reduce Kleure to nothing but hair and skin and agony. The beings that my mom had been working against, according to Vale.

"Iris and Jacob Moody were double agents," he said as I continued to stare at the memory stain. "They worked for the Oddsmakers while working against them from the inside."

I hugged myself. "That's—that's kind of incredible."

"On this night—" Vale pointed at the canvas, "—Kleure recruited your mother to side with those in Vegas who oppose their rule. It was a dangerous decision to make. You were only a year old at the time. If anything went badly, both of your parents would have been held accountable. They knew this, yet they still agreed to fight."

"Because they knew how horrible the Oddsmakers are," I breathed. "They must have seen it, also."

Vale stepped into my line of sight, his brow furrowed. "Something happened, didn't it? You mentioned violence before...Moody, tell me."

I pointed beyond him, at the canvas. "Kleure is dead. They killed him. I watched them do it."

His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I went to the Keyhole to try to learn what had attacked Diana. Kleure and other shifters were there. They accused me of being the champion of the Oddsmakers. He called me a traitor." I swallowed hard. "That's when the Oddsmakers snatched us up. Melanie was there, too, but I don't think she saw the whole thing—what they did to him. They said it was a message so magickal beings would stop resisting them and planning uprisings." I shook my head vehemently, trying to fling the memories out

of my head. "I disliked them before, but after that, I hate them, Vale. I *hate* them."

"Then maybe this won't be as difficult a decision as I had feared," he murmured, looking away. The decision to tell me seemed to have weighed heavily on him. I could tell he still had his doubts.

"I'm not afraid of them," I told him fiercely. "Not in the beginning and definitely not now."

"But you should be," he said sharply. "There's a reason they've been in control since the city's inception. They're everywhere and they're all but omnipotent."

"My mom and dad didn't seem to think so. They partnered with Kleure because they must have thought they had a chance."

Vale's expression turned pained. "Or, they underestimated what they were up against."

I heard the sliding panel open. Light spilled inside for a moment before darkness enclosed us again. Echinacious had left to grant us our privacy. Or maybe he didn't want to be party to a treasonous conversation should the Oddsmakers come calling.

"Xaran is angry because I didn't tell you this from the beginning, but there's a reason I held back," Vale said. "I wanted to be sure that this was something you could handle, that you had the guts for it. That's been answered without question. But I still held back because this is dangerous, Moody. It's deadly. You already saw what happened to Kleure, one of the most influential magickal beings in the city. The Oddsmakers don't care that word will get out. They want it to. They want us all to know how brutal they can be. That's something to think about in a serious way. There are no repercussions for anything they do. There is no higher power to punish them."

"Then don't you think that should change?"

Passion was bubbling inside my veins. I knew this was something I had to do no matter how much Vale tried to talk me out of it. I'd resented the Oddsmakers from the beginning for being bullies. It turned out they were the *ultimate* bullies, and there was only one recourse for me when faced with that. I had to knock them down and protect the rest of us.

"Xaran first recruited my mom, didn't he?" I asked Vale. "My uncle wrote about a creature arriving in Las Vegas when I was a year old, something that no one could get a proper look at. The Oddsmakers wanted

her to capture it. But she later told my uncle that she'd dealt with it." I pointed at the canvas again. "Then she's meeting with Kleure and agreeing to partner with him that same year."

"Yes, it was my brother. He'd heard rumors of the Oddsmakers employing a dragon sorceress to keep the city in line. He wanted to learn how deep her loyalty ran."

"Then Xaran already had plans to overthrow them. Why? This isn't his home. What does it matter to him what happens in Vegas?"

"Because he'd also heard another rumor, about a dark entity that was moving across the United States with ambition to rule the land and eventually the world. The rumors Xaran heard suggested that this entity might find a warmer welcome here than he'd found elsewhere."

I couldn't believe it. "You're telling me Vagasso struck some kind of deal with the Oddsmakers?"

Vale just held my gaze. "What do you think?"

I think it made too much sense. Vagasso had been running free in Vegas when he should have been stopped long ago. Why hadn't he suffered punishment for trying to summon a demon? And what about the Oddsmakers warning me not to go after him? I'd assumed—hoped—that had meant that the Oddsmakers intended to take care of him themselves. But maybe I'd been too optimistic. Too trusting.

A sickening thought suddenly occurred to me. "What if the Oddsmakers had learned that my parents were double agents?"

Vale said nothing. I could tell, though, that he wanted to and was letting me feel my way to the truth.

"They wouldn't have let it go, Vale. They would have wanted to punish my parents. And if the Oddsmakers *were* in partnership with Vagasso..." I had to take a deep breath when black spots floated across my vision. "They could have sent him to kill them that night so they could claim they had nothing to do with it. Maybe Vagasso lured Dearborn in, knowing his involvement further muddied the crime. Fingers would point everywhere but at the Oddsmakers."

"I couldn't see what happened that night," Vale admitted. "I regret that."

"It wasn't your fault." I glanced at the first memory stain photo and at the odd obfuscation that blurred my parents' car. "I'm thinking there was a reason for it: to conceal the truth."

I wanted to throw up. I also wanted to blast the entire desert near Area 51 and flush the Oddsmakers out of their hidey hole.

"Or, they could have had nothing to do with it," Vale warned somberly. "Xaran and the others would state unequivocally that Vagasso and the Oddsmakers are in league, but they would be only guessing, hoping to rile you into joining their cause. I care too much about you to deceive you that way, Moody. There's a good chance Vagasso and Dearborn are the only ones responsible for your parents' deaths."

"The best thing to do is find out for sure, right?" My smile wasn't a nice one. I wasn't in a nice mood. "I'm not easily led, Vale. I want to listen to what your brother has to say but I'm not blindly following anyone."

He took my hand. His was large and warm. It felt nothing like the claw that had saved me from a midair fall. But the gargoyle was Vale, too, and everything he'd done since long before I was born made up who he was. The alliances he'd made, the deals he'd struck. His relationship with Xaran and with the Oddsmakers, too. I couldn't blindly follow Xaran, but that applied to Vale, too, until I could get the complete picture.

"When they kidnapped you and tortured you," I said to him, searching his eyes, "did it have something to do with this, or were you telling the truth when you said they wanted to make you look pathetic so I'd help them?"

His frown all but dripped with guilt. "I'm sorry I lied to you, Moody. It was your first encounter with them. I didn't think it was the right time to tell you my suspicions. It would have altered how you interacted with them and they might have sensed your attitude. Yes, they tortured me to try to find out if I share the same sentiments as my brother. They wanted to know if I would be a threat to them. I lied to them as best I could. I don't know if they believed me. Maybe I did well enough, since they decided to use me to try to force your hand. They were desperate for you."

"They seem to have a thing for dragons," I muttered. "My uncle went to see them before he went missing. I've recently learned that he was a dragon sorcerer, not a warlock. They might have tried to recruit him, and I know how that would have went. He didn't trust them. He wouldn't have gone along. That may explain why he's missing, and why they want me. They could be hoping I'll be what my mother wasn't: their dragon for hire."

My head was swimming.

"Let's go out for a bit," I said.

Echinacious waited for us in the main gallery, beside the busts.

"Everything alright?" he inquired with a smile.

"Thank you, yes. May we keep our paintings here? Until I find a safe place for them?"

"Of course. I also have private galleries—vaults, if you will—available for rent, if you choose."

"I think that sounds better than me trying to hide them. Thank you."

I hovered awkwardly, unsure how we were supposed to submit payment. Vale took charge of that.

"I owe you two favors," he said to the goblin. "I'm at your service."

"And I will call on you in time for payment. Mr. Gargoyle, is it?"

Vale suppressed a smile. "Vale will suffice."

"A lucky guess on the first try. Fortune's on my side."

Echinacious' comments sent unease crawling over my skin. Things were about to change in a big way, and the stakes couldn't be higher or the odds lower.

"What are the other busts for?" I asked, nodding at the plaster Julius Caesar and the Medusa head.

"The Gallery of Veritatis offers additional services for those seeking artwork of a more aggressive nature," Echinacious replied coyly.

"Cursed artwork?"

"I prefer to refer to them as relief valves."

It wasn't a stretch to assume the English picnic painting that was in my shop, the one in which an axe murderer hacked up a family of picnickers in a never-ending loop, had originated here. How many other "relief valve" paintings existed in Las Vegas, each depicting an unsavory or perhaps frightening scene? Death and dismemberment over the dinner table? Stalking and stabbing in a tastefully appointed den? Truthfully, I hoped I never found out how many homicidal maniacs had commissioned pieces.

"You said that the room in there is protected, that the Oddsmakers can't see what goes on in there. Why do they permit such a thing?" My mind was buzzing with possibilities.

"I have been here a very long time," Echinacious replied enigmatically, "and I have developed a trustworthy reputation. My request for a room where magickal beings may expose their deepest, darkest, and most personal memories in private isn't much of a threat, don't you think? We are only creating art here, after all."

"So if, say, I'd like to create a group memory stain with my friends...would that be possible?"

The goblin smiled and winked. "Your business is most welcome here, Anne."

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"All our friends and your brother need to be on the same page, because even though I intend to keep everyone mostly out of this, they need to know. There may be fallout, however much I try to prevent that."

"I don't disagree. But, Moody—" Vale stepped close to me even though we were the only two people in the dark, protected room so far, "—don't let Xaran talk you into anything. He may use guilt, coercion, threats—he'll do anything to convince you to join our side. He knows how valuable you are."

"Puh-lease," I drawled. "If you think your biker wannabe brother can talk me into doing anything I don't want to do you've got a thing or two still to learn about me."

Vale shook his head but I could see that he was smiling. "I'm learning. And I'm liking every minute of it, trust me."

"Oh, Vale," I sighed. "One of these days we're going to have to role-play professor and student."

Before either of us could act on the gleam that came to his eye, Melanie burst into the room like a comet.

"Anne, what's going on?!"

"We've got some serious business to discuss, Melly. But it has to wait until everyone is here."

"Okay, so what—whoa! Who is *that*?"

I knew whom she meant before I'd turned to look. Xaran sauntered into the dark room, his thumbs hooked in the loops of his jeans. He wore smug like it was just another fashion accessory. Thank goodness Vale wasn't anything like him.

"I take it the cat's out of the bag?" He winked at Melanie. "Hello, little monkey."

Melanie sidled up to me, but I could tell she was intrigued. "Who are you? You remind me of—"

"He's my brother," Vale said as though he were admitting to an incontinence problem. "Xaran, this is Melanie."

"I know the whole gang, Vale. I've been watching them for a while."

Xaran's comment sealed my suspicion that he'd been popping in and out of Vegas since the year my uncle first mentioned him in the journal. Xaran had a vested interest in what happened to Las Vegas. Why? Just a good guy in general, fighting evil around the world? Or did he have yet another agenda?

Celestina and Lev, in his human form, entered the room, looking cautiously bewildered. Celestina had thrown on a kaftan. Her braids were tucked under a headscarf. Lev wore a pair of jeans and nothing else, not even shoes. Always testing my willpower, that one.

Echinacious waved before closing the panel, sealing the six of us inside. I quickly made introductions for Celestina's and Lev's sake. My two friends eyed Xaran as warily as I had when I'd first met him.

"First off," I told everyone, "this room is one hundred percent protected. The Oddsmakers can't see or hear anything that goes on in here."

"Leading me to believe we're about to discuss something they won't like," Celestina said dryly. She leaned against a wall, arms and ankles crossed. "Diana and Christian left Vegas a couple of hours ago, just so you know. To be precise, Diana spirited herself away and Christian headed to the airport. Do we need to call them?"

I looked to Vale, who shook his head. "I'll tell them later. It's important to Christian that he sees his mother whole and well again."

I didn't argue that, though I did send a dirty look at Xaran, who didn't even pretend to be remorseful. Sure, Diana had exaggerated about the degree of torture she'd suffered, but she had clearly felt threatened enough to leave her body. Fear of pain was as bad as pain, in my book.

"Alright," I said, "here's the down and dirty. Apparently my parents used to work for the Oddsmakers doing who knows what. I know that sounds bad, but hear me out." I took a deep breath. "My mom was a double

agent. She was working with a group of shifters and other magickal beings to try to overthrow the Oddsmakers. And the thing is, I'm thinking of doing the same thing."

"You will die," Lev said, gravely.

"Great, thanks. Anyone else with an opinion a little less grim?"

Melanie clutched her hands together in front of her chest. "I don't like it. I don't like it at all, Anne! We saw what they did to Kleure. That could be you! Why would you want to make yourself their enemy?"

"*Because we saw what they did to Kleure,*" I bit out angrily. "I stood by and let it happen and I'm sick at myself for that. Who made the Oddsmakers the bosses? Who agreed to the rules or agreed that the Oddsmakers could enforce them however they see fit? There are no trials. They decide your guilt for their own reasons and that's it. I won't stand for that."

"No one has successfully stood up to them," Celestina stated calmly. "Ever. Not in all the decades since they've been here has anyone tried to stop them and made a difference. There's no question that you're powerful, Anne, but if even your mother, whose was full-blooded Chinese, couldn't do a thing to them, what makes you think that you can?"

"Because I know something that she didn't." It was a gamble, but I was willing to bet everything on this. "Vagasso is partnered with the Oddsmakers. I don't know why—" I added quickly when my friends gasped, "—but I'm confident that taking out Vagasso will throw a serious wrench in whatever the Oddsmakers are doing here. And Vale and Xaran believe that the bunch of them are working toward something. I believe it, too. Kleure mentioned as much before they killed him."

Celestina frowned. "Who is this Kleure you keep referring to?"

I explained everything that had happened since Melanie and I entered the Keyhole, with more detail than I'd shared with Vale. I heard him curse, whether at the events or my stupidity, I didn't know. Could have been both. The others absorbed the information in shocked silence.

"Who's to say that tomorrow that won't be you or Lev being turned inside out?" I challenged Celestina. I inclined my head at Xaran, who so far had not said a word. "They already tried to kill *him*. My mom was supposed to do the job."

"Before she could, I explained to her why I was in your city," Xaran cut in with his bone-rattlingly deep voice. "What I told her opened her

eyes. We agreed to a secret partnership. Unfortunately, her failure to kill me might have been the Oddsmakers' first clue that she wasn't fully committed to their cause."

"The reason he says that, guys, is because three years later, Vagasso would murder my parents, and I believe it was with the blessing, if not outright command, of the Oddsmakers."

Melanie murmured unhappily. Even the normally unflappable Celestina looked stunned. It was a lot to soak in, I understood that. But I didn't need my friends to accept it all, just be aware of it.

"The Oddsmakers have already mentioned a couple of times that they want me for a mission. For some reason they're convinced they need someone who's descended from dragons. That means they trust me so far. I'll play that role just until I can get access to Vagasso. Then all bets are off. When that happens, you may need to scatter for a while."

"I'll do my best to protect you," Xaran chipped in. One corner of his mouth tipped up. "Looks are deceiving. I'm not only a gargoyle, I'm one with considerable influence."

"He's the heir to the Gargoyle Throne," I told my friends.

"And yet the Oddsmakers ordered Anne's mother to kill you. Doesn't sound like you have that much influence," Celestina pointed out archly. "Why do they want you dead, anyway? Why not Vale, too?"

"They want me dead because I've been active and vocal about overthrowing all demon rule, no matter where it occurs. My throne is one such place. Las Vegas is another."

This was news to me. "What are you saying, that the Oddsmakers are demons?"

"They're dark entities just as Vagasso is a dark entity. Are they actual demons? No one knows. No one has yet identified their powers or tested how far their reach is. I don't care about either of those things." Xaran brushed imaginary lint off one shoulder. "If there's a possibility they're demonic, I'll take them down. End of story."

"But what about your throne?" Melanie asked meekly. "Why haven't you already gotten rid of the demon who's sitting on it?"

He advanced on her, making her let out an 'eep!' and back away. Apparently realizing his effect on her, he held up both hands. "Sorry, little monkey. I wasn't trying to—" He frowned. "The demon imposter who sits on my family's throne sits there for the time being because it's only a

puppet. It is commanded by someone else. Someone I am trying to get my hands on."

"Vagasso," I said, snapping my fingers. "That's why you're interested in Vegas."

"Taking him and the Oddsmakers down will help the entire city, not just our family," Vale protested.

I held up my hand. "I'm not accusing you of anything. I get it. I'd go wherever it took me, too, if I were in your shoes. It's just another reason for me to do this."

"This is speculation, though," Celestina warned. I was grateful that I could always count on her to play Devil's advocate when needed. "The Oddsmakers could be dark entities, sure. Or they could be antisocial sorcerers. Don't base this decision on assumptions, Anne."

"You're right. I wouldn't hunt them purely on the rumor that they might be dark. What I will hunt them for is their actions. I refuse to sit by while they level punishment on another magickal being in Vegas without a proper trial. I never signed up for a tyranny. None of us did."

"And why they not kill Vale?" Lev asked. He had sort of hunched up his shoulders, reminiscent of a wolf whose hackles had risen.

"I'm a problem for them," Vale replied. "They're aware that I'm with Anne, and they can't afford to alienate her. They want her. They need her."

"For what?" Melanie asked, grimacing as if she feared the answer.

"The mission," I said. I shrugged when my friends look at me questioningly. "I don't know either. Doesn't matter. For now, they think I'm some dumb loser at their beck and call. That buys me time to go after Vagasso. We need to break them apart, and he'll be the easier target."

"Anne, what about, you know, going full dragon?" Melanie nearly whispered the question. "Aren't you still afraid of that?"

To my surprise, I realized that that fear had not entered my mind at all once I'd learned of my mother's actions.

"No," I told Melanie, "I'm not afraid of that. If my mom didn't succumb to her dragon, I won't either."

"Good," Celestina huffed. I sent her a quick smile.

The room fell into silence. I was happy to give my friends all the time they needed to decide how much distance they wanted to put between

me and them. Learning your friend might be the reason you were killed wasn't something you swallowed easily.

Finally, a small voice said, "What if we all just moved to L.A.?"

I slung an arm around Melanie's shoulders. "You can do that. We all could. Maybe you should, at least for a few weeks. That'd make me feel good that you're safe. But I can't go with you. Moonlight belongs to my family. The Oddsmakers took that family away from me. I'm staying, no matter what happens."

Celestina shared a look with Lev. He nodded tightly. "Wolf-boy says we're staying. I say if the Oddsmakers ruin Las Vegas, what's to stop them from expanding their reach to other cities? Running won't solve anything. You're right, Anne: they can't be allowed to continue what they're doing. If there's a way to help you, Lev and I are available."

"This could get you killed," I warned them sternly.

"So could driving to the post office. This makes for a better epitaph."

I wasn't surprised that Celestina and Lev weren't running away—she had a business that was doing well—but I was surprised by the offer of assistance. That took some guts.

Melanie curled her arm around my waist and sighed loudly. "It wouldn't be any fun driving the Todos Tortas truck in L.A. I've heard the traffic is horrible. I'm staying!"

"But you'll stay out of it," I insisted.

She shrugged with a mischievous grin. "Monkey see, monkey do. If you fight, I fight!"

"And if I die?"

She didn't back down. "We'll go down fighting together."

I nodded with reluctance. My throat had tightened up painfully.

"Since you can't be seen speaking with the shifters of Fremont, I'll go in your stead," Xaran said, thankfully taking up the slack. "It would be unwise to let any of them know that you're working with us. Information like that would fetch a high price from the Oddsmakers. So for now, I'll be the liaison between you and that faction."

"Call it the Rebellion," I said, after clearing my throat. "Make this all *Star Wars* so I'll have a theme song to hum while I'm fighting our evil overlords."

My friends gave me a pity laugh, mostly to break the tension. We'd all just agreed to possibly die fighting dark spirits that might or might not be demons from Hell. It was a heavy thing.

"We'll find ways to keep everyone updated as we go along," Vale said. "For now, everyone should get some sleep. Maybe you'll feel differently in the morning. There'll be no shame in that. We only wanted you to be aware of the danger, and give you the heads up to avoid it."

"I won't change my mind." Melanie gave my waist a squeeze.

"We no change either," Lev grunted, puffing out his chest. Celestina patted him approvingly on the shoulder.

"Then let's break this up," Vale said. "Moody and I need to discuss some things."

My friends filed out into the main gallery while Xaran lingered behind with Vale and me.

"We're going to succeed this time," he told us confidently. "Before, it was only your mother, with help from your father. I don't count the shifters because one of them likely squealed on her. *Your* friends will be useful."

"We're not using them." I gave him a good heaping of glare. "They're *helping* us. Big difference."

He waved off my nitpicking. "In the end, it will be the same. All that matters is that we win."

Win. Was that the correct word for what we were aiming for? A win? That sounded too inconsequential, like we were gearing up for a basketball game against a particularly vicious opponent. This was so much more than that. Freedom was what we were fighting for, and I didn't care if using that term made me sound corny. Freedom from bullies was enough to motivate me to do nearly anything.

"I'll come find you once I've spoken with the shifters—make that, the Rebellion—tomorrow tonight." Xaran smirked at the use of the name. "Until then, lay low, if that's possible."

I could hear Vale grinding his teeth before he spoke. "We'll be fine. Go do what you need to do."

It was clear that he couldn't be rid of his brother fast enough. I shared the feeling. Xaran was using me, even if our needs were aligned for the time being. It was a relief when it was finally just the two of us in that dark room with the spotlighted painting of a memory of revolution.

"Definitely need a theme song for this," I stated.

Vale brushed a lock of hair away from my cheek. "We need to go back to your place. I have a date with a rebel leader that I need to complete before sunrise."

"Consummate," I murmured, holding his gaze. "I think that's the word you're after."

His eyes blazed. "You're not wrong."

We bid Echinacious farewell for the time being. I had zero doubts that the goblin was trustworthy. He had a spark in him that made me think he'd fought his own battles back in the day. A defiant goblin after my own heart.

At Moonlight, I set the wards and locked all the doors. We were vulnerable now, our actions potentially spied upon by the Oddsmakers, our intentions at risk of discovery. But I think in part that very danger goaded us to push the limits, to risk defiance in plain sight.

I didn't think Vale was in the mood for talking anymore about our plans, however. He pushed me gently but firmly toward my bed.

"Remove my shirt," he whispered.

The lights were off, but the backyard illumination gave me enough to see him by, enough to see the desire heating his gaze and the tension in his muscles as I peeled off his shirt. Vale allowed me to run the show most of the time, either consciously or subconsciously submitting to my need to feel that my choices and decisions were my own. But when it was just the two of us, bare skin to bare skin, there was no questioning his masculinity and power. I gasped when he wordlessly pressed me against the nearest wall with his body. He was heat and strength against me. He was protection and love, holding me tight.

"Whatever happens," he whispered against my ear, "you will always be the most magnificent creature I have ever known. Your heart is larger than a dragon's. Your spirit is more beautiful than an angel's."

I sank into the words, falling gladly under his spell. "I wouldn't be able to do any of this without you."

His lips curved as he kissed down the side of my throat. "Yes, you would, Moody. You don't need me. You don't need anyone. But you choose me, and that means everything to me."

He laced our fingers together and brought our hands up above my head. Sealed tight against me, he fit me perfectly. When he pressed my



hands to the wall in an unspoken command to keep them there I obeyed. He slid my clothes off as though they were doubts that had no business being between us.

We writhed against the wall, my body climbing his. He gasped against my mouth, "I have no more secrets." His muscles bunched as he joined us. "Anything you want from me...it's yours, Moody."

I don't need your sacrifice, I thought in a piercing moment of clarity. *I don't need you to risk your life for me.* Yet as soon as I thought this, I understood that Vale needed to do these things for me. His kisses bled with his guilt for not preventing my parents' deaths. His breath, mingling with mine, was harsh with regret for keeping his motives hidden from me for so long. Vale wanted the Oddsmakers and Vagasso gone because they were terrible beings, but he also wanted penance.

He didn't need it from me.

I clutched his hair. I tightened my legs around his hips. I surged forward, possessive and greedy, and bit his collarbone. "I want you to do this to me, exactly like this, a decade from now," I panted against his skin. "So don't you dare let me down, do you hear me? Don't you dare."

He growled and pressed me hard into the wall, his passion getting the best of him. I let him take me, reveling in it, knowing that surrender to him was no loss at all.

In the morning, I woke up in bed lying beside a stone gargoyle. Tenderly, I traced a fearsome fang with my fingertip. Vale was never more beautiful than when he offered himself to me like this. It was a degree of trust no one had ever given to me before, and I cherished it.

Protectiveness caused me to clutch the statue tight to my breast. Setting it on the shelf behind me in Moonlight no longer felt safe enough. I needed a hidey hole, somewhere the Oddsmakers or Vagasso could never find it.

As I was considering all the options, the world flipped upside down. I shouted breathlessly as a monster roared.

*"Hello, Anne Moody. We'd like to talk to you."*

## Chapter 10

I didn't feel like opening Moonlight for business. Why go through the motions for something that felt sickeningly inconsequential in the grand scope of my life?

But I dutifully opened up for business. I was a shopkeeper eighty percent of the time. So that was what I did. I kept shop.

As desperate gamblers negotiated with me for more cash, and as curious tourists scratched their heads or giggled over the items on the shelves, my mind raced in place. The hours passed. I took in a set of four hubcaps for pawn and bought a pair of glasses that could magickally see through metal. I sold the ancient Casio keyboard as well as a keychain that could magickally, temporarily, turn your car's exterior red.

Nothing exciting. Nothing unexpected. I zoned in and out, trying to make sense of the joke that my life had become. It wasn't easy.

No, it was impossible.

The Oddsmakers had snatched me from my bed that morning. Nothing in my life had been more difficult than standing in their house of horrors and keeping my face blank and my rage still. Melanie hadn't been present. The little canary hadn't been present. It had been me all alone with no one to fear hurting. The urge to blast everything to hell had made me dizzy and sick.

Maybe I could have succeeded. Maybe going full dragon and full gonzo would have ended the Oddsmakers' reign then and there.

Then again, maybe it wouldn't have. Xaran's admonition that no one truly knew how powerful the Oddsmakers were had ran through my head tauntingly. It was that niggling fear that victory might require more than me and my dragon which had stayed my hand. It had kept me nodding my head and clenching my jaw so tightly my head had bellowed with pain.

I was obedient. I played dumb. Afterwards, the Oddsmakers kindly deposited me back in my room with a metaphorical pat on the head.

I could have screamed. But I didn't.

Instead, I'd spent the next ten minutes throwing up in the bathroom, the Oddsmaker's announcement continuing to wind insidiously through my head like a parasitic worm:

*"Anne Moody, it is time for you to complete the first part of your mission."*

I stabbed my finger at the register, startling the older man who was buying a wallet with fleur-de-lis stamped into the leather. I didn't apologize. I shoved his change at him and wished him gone. I wished them all gone. But it was too early to close up shop. And Anne Moody, as the Oddsmakers knew, didn't rebel against orders. She was spineless.

When business slowed, I pulled up my laptop and accessed the search engine. I Googled "green striped wallpaper Las Vegas", with only the barest of expectations. Lots of useless results came up, but on page three I found what I was looking for, amazingly, in a Missed Connections ad on Craigslist.

"Damn," I whispered as I gazed dully over the shop.

Nothing could stop me now.

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I dressed like a badass. Jeans and a leather jacket. My lace-up boots with thick heels. I wasn't out to impress; I was out to send a message. I knew all about sending messages. The Oddsmakers had taught me and I'd taken the lesson to heart.

The handsome young man in the bathroom mirror whose face was being eaten by maggots looked like a supermodel compared to the ugliness that I saw in my own face. I waved at the curse, but since the guy's eyes were covered with the larvae, I guess he didn't see me. Or maybe he didn't like me.

That would've made two of us.

I wrapped up Vale's statue with the softest blanket I owned and laid it tenderly in the center of my bed. Sunset was less than an hour away so I didn't linger. I called up a car service and then locked up Moonlight. I didn't, however, set the wards.

Just in case I didn't return.

The car service took me out of downtown and onto the 95 heading south. I watched the sun sink over the Spring Mountains, bathing Las Vegas in oranges and reds and eventually purples that gave way to night. When we pulled onto Boulder Highway it was fully dark. Things that went bump in the night would now be awake. I tried not to think about that, though, as we drove.

Boulder Highway at night could be less than savory. You wouldn't find high-priced call girls here. The prostitutes looked rough. The dealers looked rougher. Anyone walking alongside the highway looked like they were up to no good or had been victims of people who were up to no good.

Certainly where I was dropped off fit that description as well. The Runaways was a dive bar that made other dive bars look posh. You had to walk around a stinking Dumpster to reach the front door which didn't have a handle, just a piece of crooked wire threaded through the holes where the handle had once been bolted on. On a different day I would have pulled my jacket down over my hand before grabbing the wire, or maybe used the toe of my boot. But this was a different sort of day. I hooked my fingers through the wire and yanked the battered door open.

My eyes began to burn the moment I stepped inside. The smoke was a veritable slap to the face, a test of your manliness. I had a forest of hair spurting from my chest as I slowly made my way between the beat-up tables, many of which were missing all of their chairs.

There were three people in the place besides me. The bartender was a sleepy-looking grandpa type who was rubbing a rag over a spot on the bar top with such concentration it made me wonder if he was trying to bore an escape hole to get the hell out of there. Just across from him at the bar sat something gray-haired and hunched over. I say "something" because it could have been a woman or a man. Or maybe some kind of animal.

The third person in the bar I wasn't sure I could claim was actually in it. The guy stood in the corner of the room, the toes of his ratty tennis shoes touching the two connecting walls. That was it. Just standing there, hands forward and out of sight. Was he in another world, mentally? He wore a hip-length dirty green coat and saggy dark pants. I hoped he wasn't urinating, but who knew.

Ambiance-wise, the place was crappy and dingy. You drank here to hide from the world, not to find any pleasure in drinking or in socializing.

That seemed to fit my reason for being here, too, at least partly.

The bartender still hadn't noticed me. I doubted he would unless I waved a five under his nose, and even then it might need to be rolled up and dusted with cocaine. His inattention allowed me to explore the small, miserable room without notice. There wasn't much to look at: a dartboard near the guy in the corner with most of its cork pulled out, a couple of framed photographs of desert scenes, their glasses stained brown from the pervasive cigarette smoke, and a payphone whose receiver was probably a raging source of oral herpes. Nice.

No green striped wallpaper, but then, I hadn't thought it would be that easy.

Grimacing, I made my way toward the back, where there was a doorway I assumed led to the restrooms. I prayed I wouldn't have to go inside them because who knew what atrocities I'd find in there. I ended up drawing up short just outside the doorway, checking out the walls, the floor, even the stained ceiling.

Nothing.

Now what?

"Oh, god," I groaned as I eyed the doorway to what was surely a Hell on earth. "I really don't want to."

"Then don't."

I spun, my dragon primed and ready to explode. But it was only a girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen. She was odd-looking, but in a strangely cute way. She wore a black, Lolita-style dress, a multi-layered thing drowning in ruffles that I didn't see often in Vegas because of the scorching temperatures. Her nose was nothing but a pinch of flesh. Her eyes were buttons of dark brown. Bright, sunflower blond curls made her round face appear even rounder. In a way she reminded me of images of Shirley Temple when she was a child: uber cutesy but not in an obnoxious or doll-like way. There was something homespun about this girl, like she'd grown up on a farm in Kansas and hitchhiked her way to Vegas without being sold into sex trafficking. At least, I hoped she hadn't been.

"Don't go in there," she said. She wasn't smiling, but she seemed interested in what happened to me. "What you're looking for isn't in there anyway."

I took a step back. My three friends in the bar remained oblivious to my conversation with this girl. I felt for the rumble in my chest.

"What am I looking for?" I asked, waiting for the shit to hit the fan.

"You're looking for the meeting." Her dark eyes were suddenly piercing. "You're looking for those of us who oppose the Oddsmakers."

I looked around again. Still no one was paying any attention to us. I'd hoped to slip into the meeting without being noticed, but this girl might ruin my plans by forcing me to engage before I'd found the stupid place.

"I'm just looking for a friend," I said. "But you said you know where—"

"I'm not letting you go in there and do what you came here to do."

"What's my mission?" I asked the Oddsmakers warily. My heart began to pound. What had changed that they could tell me now? Did they know that I was plotting against them?

"Your mission is to do what Iris Moody failed to do: rid Las Vegas of the heir to the Gargoyle Throne. Xaran Morgan must die."

I took another step back from Curly Sue. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just—"

"I was there!" she hissed suddenly, her girlish charm swallowed by a fierce grief I understood well.

"You're the canary," I whispered. My widened eyes took her in. It was so obvious in hindsight.

"I'm not a little girl," she choked out, her dark eyes shimmering. "Looks can be deceiving. I've been with Kleure for centuries. I mean...I was." A sob slipped from her lips before she pressed them shut. Twin beads of moisture slid down her rounded cheeks. "He was mine, and they turned him inside out."

Her rage was greater than mine. It eclipsed the sun. I could say nothing when faced with something so enormous and powerful.

She pointed a delicate finger at me. "You watched it all and did nothing."

Swallowing razorblades would have been easier than admitting, "That's true."

I waited for a little yellow bird to go straight for my eyes. I'm not sure in that moment that I would have defended myself.

But she didn't transform. She blinked more tears. They ran sweetly down her cheeks, like she was a maple tree in the spring.

"You wanted to."

I was sure I'd misheard her. "What?"

"Are you like your mother?"

"In what way?"

"Iris betrayed us," this nameless girl, who was not a girl, told me. "She turned in dozens of us to the Oddsmakers."

"My mom didn't betray any of you," I said sharply. "She was loyal to your cause to the end."

She bit her lip. Her brows drew down and the tears stopped flowing. "How can you be sure?"

"Because the Oddsmakers killed her."

There was no greater—or damning—truth than that. My mom was valuable to them, but they had preferred to see her dead than have her rise against them.

There were ruffles around the canary shifter's throat. They vibrated with the manic pulse beating beneath the skin there.

"Then I'm right: you *are* just like your mother." Her voice dropped to a whisper, not to hide, but because I think the words hurt her to speak. "I looked at you when it happened. I saw the hate in your eyes when they did that to Kleure. If you're working for them now, your heart's not in it."

I laughed harshly. "That's the understatement of the year."

"And yet you're here, looking for them. For us."

I held her eyes. "I'm not here for you."

"I can't kill him," I gasped. "He's Vale's brother."

"Must we torture Vale again to encourage you? Or your friends?" The sickly sweet voice tittered. "This time we might go too far, Anne. We have a tendency to get...carried away."

"No," I whispered. "Don't you touch him. Don't touch any of them."

"Then say please and do as we say."

There was blood on my lips. Hate in my heart. "Please..."

"Do you work for the Oddsmakers?"

The question pulled me out of my memory of that morning. I shook my head and looked away. "It's complicated."

"That means yes, but they've ordered you to do something you don't want to. What is it? Turn us in?" She hesitated. "Slaughter us all?"

"I wouldn't!" I snarled at her. But reality wouldn't allow me to ride that high horse very far. In fact, it bucked me off and kicked me in the head. "Not everyone," I muttered, burning with shame.

"If you don't do this, they'll know you're just like Iris."

I tried to figure out what she was getting at. It was like trying to learn the secrets of the universe from the face of a kewpie doll.

"I don't have a choice," I said. It was like pulling out my own guts to say it. "They're going to hurt someone important to me if I don't do this."

"Would you destroy them if you could?" Her gaze was steady. Ancient. She was like Vale. She'd seen it all. But I got the impression she'd finally seen too much.

I didn't have to tell her anything if I didn't want to. She could be trying to trick me into revealing myself. But my instincts didn't believe it. To love someone for centuries and then lose them the way she had lost Kleure...her grief burned the air around us, and she was its supernova center. It was how I would be, if the Oddsmakers took Vale.

"I'm going to end every last one of them," I told her in a voice that came from the depths of my soul. "I'm going to bury them so deeply that even Time won't recall their existence. And while I'm doing it, I'm going to make them hurt."

She nodded, just once. "But to get close enough to do it, you have to kill someone tonight and earn their trust."

"Yes."

"They demanded the same of Iris. She was supposed to kill Xaran." The girl pursed her lips when I flinched. "That's who it is, isn't it? It's still him. They can't abide that he's alive. It's like he's mocking them."

"I have to do it," I declared. "One sacrifice to save the rest." But my voice wavered and sickness threatened to roil up from my stomach again.

"You won't do it." The girl touched the sleeve of my jacket. Her touch was a ghost's. "I'll help you save him. Just promise me that you'll do what you said you'd do to the Oddsmakers. You'll make them suffer like my Kleure suffered."

"I promise." It was the easiest promise I'd ever made.

"Then the plan is this: I'll fight you off while Xaran escapes. And then you'll kill me."

I stared at her. "That's a lousy plan."

"Is it? You said it yourself: one sacrifice to save the rest. It should be me. My Kleure is gone. I don't want to be here any longer." She firmed her jaw. "If my death will bring him vengeance, then it's no sacrifice at all."

"The Oddsmakers won't buy it."

"We'll make them buy it. I'll fight you like a wild animal. You won't have a chance of going after Xaran. That's what you'll tell them. That's what you'll *sell* them."

It was a risk for sure. The Oddsmakers might see through it. But if they didn't, it would spare Xaran and Vale both. If someone had to die, why not someone who wanted to?

"It's the only way you can get on their good side," she told me, giving me the hard sell to end all hard sells. "You *must* do this."

I felt like a major bitch, but she had a point. "Okay," I said reluctantly, feeling dirty down to my soul. "Let's do it."

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When you wanted to fall in love, you thought it needed to be perfect. Whoever he or she was, they would sweep you off your feet at just the right time. They would say what you wanted to hear, and they would know when to hold you when words no longer were enough. They wouldn't hurt you, and they wouldn't lie. They'd be perfect in all ways, and in turn, that would make you perfect, too.

Vale and I weren't perfect. He'd lied to me so many times that I'd lost count. I'd argued with him and stood up to him in front of others including his brother. I'd done the exact opposite of what he'd told me to do and somehow he hadn't left me, when perhaps he should have. Together we were imperfect, but we were something special all the same.

I hadn't told him I loved him. He hadn't said the words either. Funny, that. Considering how often we'd faced life-threatening situations together you'd think the timing would have been perfect for uttering those three little words.

But we hadn't, time and again, even though I knew I loved him. Even though I knew he loved me.

Did we fear that speaking the words aloud would set the stage for one of those chick flick tragedies? Did we worry we'd be tempting fate with our happiness?

Love was such a powerful thing. It could inspire you to do anything. Even, it turned out, things that went against our natures.

I followed the canary shifter behind the bar and past the old bartender who didn't raise his gaze from the square of wood he polished. She touched the back wall and a trapdoor opened in the floor. There were stairs leading down to a light source. The sound of impassioned voices. She looked back at me and smiled sadly. Then she raced down the stairs, the heels of her Mary Janes clomping like gunshots. I thundered after her in my boots.

I burst into the room just a few feet after her and immediately I saw the green striped wallpaper that was in Vale's memory stain. But my attention didn't linger long on the walls. The room was full of magickal beings of all sorts. And Xaran was there, standing in the middle of them as though he'd been leading a meeting.

Which he had been.

He and the others spun with alarm when the canary shifter began screaming, "She's found us! She's coming! Run!"

When Xaran saw me there in that secret place he finally revealed something other than cool cockiness. Naked fear flared bright like a fluorescent flag in the depths of his dark eyes. Xaran knew exactly why I was there.

The Reaper had come a' callin'.

"The Oddsmakers send their regards to Xaran," I announced loudly so every being there would hear me.

Pandemonium broke out.

Someone shoved open a door at the other end of the room. It led into darkness, so it was probably a tunnel to another exit. I needed to work fast, before they all fled.

I pulled up Lucky, made him big and bad and snarling. His light turned the room into a box of fire. Screams and howls and terrified barking combined into a nightmare cacophony. I bared my teeth and Lucky roared, just to twist the dial on their terror just a little bit higher.

"Traitor!" screamed the canary shifter. "You're nothing but a traitor!"

I didn't have to fake the angry roar that Lucky emitted. Dust rained down from the ceiling. More screaming. Lucky, excited like a predator facing a field full of running prey, lashed his tail from side to side, ready to wreak havoc.

"I'll stop you!" Curly Sue yelled. She turned and shoved Xaran toward the tunnel that the others were escaping through. "Run! I'll hold her off!"

Confused and caught up in the hysteria in the room, Xaran staggered backward a few paces.

That was my cue. I braced for Curly Sue to come at me.

What a plan. Only love could have come up with a plan like this. Only love made you believe that life wasn't worth living if it wasn't with the person you loved, the person who made you perfect.

I'd agreed to the plan because I believed in love.

One sacrifice to save the rest. It was the only math that made sense.

But a second before going through with it, I muttered, "Screw that."

Her eyes rounded when she realized I'd changed my mind. She ran at me anyway, screaming like a banshee. My skin rippled with scales. I coughed out the fire that had been building in my chest. Orange flame licked across the room and she couldn't help herself—she dropped to the floor like everyone else.

Because in the end, we all want to live. And love can make us brave in different ways.

Remember, I told myself desperately. *Remember!*

And then I gave in to the dragon.

I roared. The room shook and more dust fell. I surged forward and closed my jaws around Xaran, who let out a shout of anger and fright. Then I smashed through the ceiling, through a storage room on the ground floor, and burst through the roof of the Runaways and into the warm night air.

Dragon of doom! Dragon rules all! Dragon, dragon, dragon!

I flapped my wings hard, racing with my treasure for the dark, dark mountains. My prize wriggled and squirmed between the cage of my teeth. At some point it became a smaller thing with a different shape. I could feel its wings trying to flap, its sharp edges tickling the surface of my tongue. My tiny dragon brain was excited by my prey's struggle. Eating it would be all the more fun!

*No, it needs to burn.*

The thought came from nowhere, but I understood it to be true. Yes! Yes, I would burn it with my fearsome dragon's breath and then all the world would see what a powerful dragon I was. I flew faster for the mountains, that small, mysterious voice urging me to hide behind them so I could have my fun undisturbed.

It didn't take me long to reach the first crags of darkness. I circled gleefully, luxuriating in the smooth glide of my sinuous body through the air. I looped and spiraled, ignoring the fluttering wings of the struggling creature within my grasp. I roared around my mouthful, hearing my voice echoing throughout the canyons. Such a beautiful sound!

I swooped and spun for minutes, feeling joyful for my freedom. Something stabbed the side of my tongue. My treasure! It was time to burn, burn, burn.

The canyon formed a bowl that would be perfect for cooking up my treat. I would let it go, let it run, and think it had a chance. Then I would hunt it down and tear it apart and—

*It needs to burn.*

Yes, yes. Burn it. Let it sizzle in my blazing dragon's breath. I spat my prize down to the ground, watched it sprawl on the red dirt, its tiny wings struggling to right its body. It was a gargoyle. I knew this thing.

*Remember: obfuscation.*

The word crinkled my brow. What was that? What did it mean? I hovered above my prey, uncertain why I wasn't simply burning it up. My tail flicked impatiently beneath me, stirring up a small cloud of dust and debris. The sight pricked a memory in my brain.

*Obfuscation.*

I knew that word. I knew mystery and hiding and concealment and—a Honda at the base of a cliff, its headlights illuminating the clouds.

I coiled in the air and then began to fly a tight circle above the ground, faster and faster, spinning tighter and tighter. Below me, the dirt began to rise up in a funnel, forming a red sandstone dirt devil.

The gargoyle was somewhere down there beneath it all, but something compelled me to make the dirt devil even bigger and denser. So I did, widening my circle until a huge, wonderful tornado of red dust filled the canyon, blurring the sight of the mountains and everything beneath it. I could no longer see the gargoyle. Was it there?

It must be! Burn it!

I breathed a streamer of fire. The tornado caught the flames like a thrown rope. It twisted the yellows and golds into a funnel that rose up high into the sky.

Burn! Burn!

I roared with delight as the canyon filled with fire. Soon, I would burn the world!

*Fight.*

I would fight, alright. I would fight like a dragon fights! I would bite and rip and tear and shred and—

I whipped my body through the air, pushing myself away from the dwindling winds of the fire tornado. I knew what I was and it wasn't a dragon. I crashed against a mountain, the sound echoing throughout the canyon like cannon fire. My blood sang to me and cajoled me. It reminded me how wonderful it had felt to be the dragon, to be myself, *finally*...

But I am just like my mother. Not a traitor. Not a dragon. A sorceress, with someone to protect.

I strained to separate myself from this serpentine body with its tiger claws and fangs that snapped. I resisted a terrible history and a stigma that had not been of my making.

I pictured a canary, surrendering her life to achieve vengeance for a black dog with blue flames around its head. That was love. The greatest power. More powerful than this dragon, who couldn't feel it. Who never would.

Fight this. You don't need Liliana to help you. You don't need Vale.

Fight yourself. You are who you choose to be.

You are not a traitor.

You are not a monster.

You are Anne Moody.

You are Anne Moody.

You are...

"... dying for a taco," I groaned as I woke up on the floor of the Runaways.



## Chapter 11

*"Did you achieve the first part of your mission, Anne Moody?"*

I tipped up my chin. "You saw it, didn't you? With your all-seeing Elvises, or whoever you use? I burned Xaran in the mountains. He's toast. If I'd known you wanted a trophy I would have done it differently. Sorry. Hazard of working with a dragon sorceress. I like to burn things."

I was playing a risky game, throwing attitude at the Oddsmakers, but sometimes I simply couldn't help it. I felt invincible. I had pulled myself back from my dragon on my own. I had conquered my greatest fear.

I felt like a Grade A Badass.

I stared challengingly at the figure beneath the black curtain/shroud thingy. But as the seconds stretched, nervousness began to set in. I thought of Kleure's fate. I thought of the countless others who had suffered at their hands. Going all in with the Oddsmakers risked not only my life, but the lives of everyone I loved.

I forced myself to think of other things, just in case they could read minds. I doubted it, otherwise my mom wouldn't have been able to trick them for three years, but you never really knew with these creepy weirdos. Safer to think of my softest blanket back home, and what I had wrapped carefully in it eight hours ago.

*"You did well,"* the saccharine voice said at last.

Delayed reaction hit me like a mallet. *Holy cow, they bought it.* My knees were weak. If I'd been wearing shorts it would have been obvious that my legs were shaking.

"I held up my end of the deal," I said, glad my voice was steady. "You'll leave Vale and the rest of my friends alone."

*"While you remain a friend of the Oddsmakers, the Oddsmakers will remain a friend of Anne Moody."*

Hardly a promise to embrace. Sort of like receiving a friend request from Vladimir Putin, but I'd take it for now.

"I want to go home," I said. Though just a second ago the badassness had been strong in me, it was now rapidly draining from me like hair dye, revealing my graying roots.

When I'd returned to my body, which had been lying on the floor of the secret meeting place beneath the Runaways, it was to find the canary shifter watching over me. All the other members of the Rebellion had fled. Like the Oddsmakers, they were now convinced that I was a traitor to my own kind. Mission accomplished, I guess.

She hadn't said a word about my decision to spare her life and go full dragon. I didn't know if she was disappointed that I hadn't sent her to the other side to join Kleure or if she was relieved that she now lived to fight another day.

When I'd left her, I'd done so without knowing her name. I regretted that now, but at the time I hadn't been thinking all that clearly.

*"We will call upon you when we require your services again, Anne Moody."*

"Great." I saluted the ceiling of the Oddsmakers' lair. "Can't wait for that call."

I didn't expect a thank you and I didn't get one. The room grew colder and darker. A brick smashed into my head and the next thing I knew I was waking up on the floor of my kitchenette.

I really needed to get out of the habit of waking up on the floor.

A body hurtled toward me and dropped to its knees beside me.

"Moody!" Vale hauled me up against him like I was a ragdoll made of cotton. He all but cracked my ribs. I loved every second of it.

"I don't know," I gasped out as emotion suddenly swamped me. "I don't know if I did what I wanted to. I couldn't tell. I was in the dragon—it sees things differently."

Vale held me away from him so our eyes could meet. "You did what the Oddsmakers demanded of you," he said, his fingers tightening around my upper arms. Though his words were dire, his face told me a different story. I let my eyes slide shut with relief.

"Tit for tat," I whispered against his ear when he hugged me close again. Vale was an excellent hugger. All those hard muscles, that heat—you'd think he'd be as comfortable as hugging an oven. But by some trick



of magick his body cradled mine like the softest, most awesomest bean bag chair. I didn't care about eating or sleeping. I only wanted to be held by him.

"What does that mean?" he whispered back. "Tit for tat?"

"Your memory stain of that night. No one could see..." I couldn't say more for fear of pixies overhearing, but Vale was intelligent, and maybe he'd talked with Xaran about what had gone down tonight.

"Tit for tat, indeed." I heard the pride in his voice. He pulled back again, but only far enough to fit his mouth over mine. "I wish you hadn't done that alone," he whispered between feverish kisses that sought to turn me into a puddle right there in the kitchenette. "I wanted to be there with you. To help you find a solution."

"You were. You did." I carded my fingers through his deliciously tousled hair, hair I'd fought to return to. I broke our kiss, needing his full attention. "I-I want you to know something, Vale Morgan."

Curses and fate be damned. Not every chick flick ended up a tearjerker.

He caressed my cheek. "I already know, Anne Moody. I love you, too."

And there it was. Maybe the world would end, but hopefully not before I got some action.

He leaned over me, his dark eyes burning with possession. "You did it, Moody."

"They trust me," I whispered. I laughed, incredulous. "The cameos told me there'd be a betrayal and I thought it would happen against me. But it's me. *I'm* the betrayer."

"For the right reasons," he murmured.

"You know what else they told me?" I stroked his nape. "That you'd be trouble for me."

Vale's grin was wicked. "The kind of trouble you like, I hope."

I slid my hand down his spine. "I like a lot of things about you."

"Let me show you a few more things to like." His voice was rough and sexy, making me shiver. But the arms he curled beneath me to lift me off the floor were gentle and revealed how achingly protective he felt toward me.

My parents would have adored him.

They would have been proud of me tonight.

Neither of those things, however, were now possible. But one day, eventually, my parents would rest in peace, because I would find vengeance for all of us. And if the anticipation of that moment added a touch of spice to my lovemaking with Vale, well, that was just an unexpected bonus.

Book 4, Forged in Fire, is coming soon! Keep informed by joining the mailing list at

<http://www.triciaowensbooks.com/moonlightdragon>

#### Author's Note

I took quite a few liberties with the anatomy of the Stratosphere to make it the perfect location for an assignation between Anne and Vale. As much as I would love it, I doubt any magickal creatures would be capable of living there without notice.

Or is that what they want us to believe?

#### About the Author

Tricia Owens has worked as a casino dealer in Las Vegas and as an editor on a cruise ship that sails around the world. Having visited more than 80 countries, she's content (for the moment) to relax in Las Vegas. She assures you the real Sin City is much weirder than anything depicted in her books.